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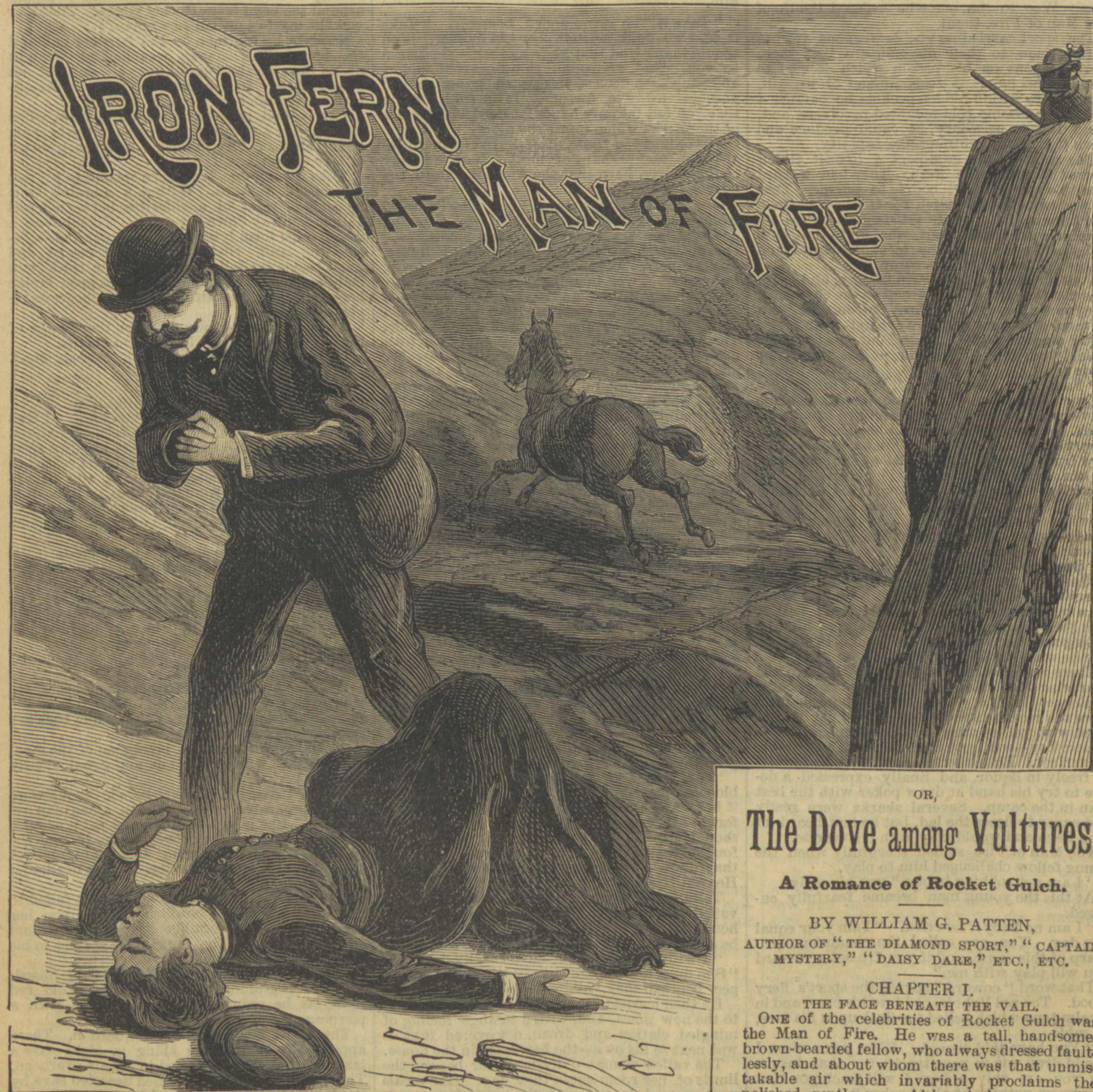
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FOR A MOMENT IRON FERN STARED WILDLY AT THAT PALE BEAUTIFUL FACE, HIS WHOLE FORM CONVULSED WITH EMOTION.

OR, The Dove among Vultures.

A Romance of Rocket Gulch.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE DIAMOND SPORT," "CAPTAIN MYSTERY," "DAISY DARE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FACE BENEATH THE VAIL.
ONE of the celebrities of Rocket Gulch was the Man of Fire. He was a tall, handsome, brown-bearded fellow, who always dressed faultlessly, and about whom there was that unmistakable air which invariably proclaims the polished gentleman. Although he was usually quiet and reserved, he had few friends in the little mining-camp. Only too well was it known

that his quiet manners concealed the fiery passions of a fiend, and that when aroused to anger, those handsome brown eyes would flash and glow like twin orbs of flame. It was on account of this peculiarity of the strange man that some one had called him the Man of Fire. The name had struck the fancy of the people of Rocket Gulch, and therefore it had "stuck."

On his first appearance in Rocket Gulch he had given his name as Fernald Irons, but, in some way peculiar to the country, the name had been transposed and abridged till it became Iron Fern, and, as Iron Fern, the Man of Fire, he was universally known in that camp.

Iron Fern was a gambler. Not a common card-sharp who fleeced such innocent "chickens" as might be lured into his grasp, but a sport of nerve, who met and conquered those who boasted of their skill in the disreputable profession. He played recklessly, and his success seemed pure luck instead of skill or keen judgment. Sometimes he met with heavy reverses, but usually he was fortunate. He only played when in the mood to do so, and, as he recklessly staked his money on the turn of a card, his eyes were filled with that strange red light that cautious men well knew was a danger signal. His cheeks would be flushed, his blood leaping in his veins, and the touch of his hand was like that of a hot iron. Woe to the one who arcused the ire of this Man of Fire, then!

The sport carried no visible weapons, yet not a few knew to their discomfiture that there were weapons on his person which seemed to leap into his hands at the command of his will. Somewhere within hidden pockets he carried a pair of handsome gold-mounted revolvers, and, when it was necessary, he could produce and work them with lightning-like rapidity.

The most of the gamblers of Rocket Gulch steered clear of Iron Fern. They had learned that this was the best course to pursue. That he was more than a match for the best of them had been proved to their satisfaction by his encounter with Flush Font, who up to that date had been considered the most desperate and successful gambler in the camp.

Font challenged Iron Fern to play, and, with alacrity the Man of Fire accepted the challenge. They met in the White Dove Saloon, and with a crowd of eager spectators around them, played till one was broke. Flush Font was the loser. Quickly he drew a revolver, at the same time crying:

"Foul play! You cheated, Iron Fern!"

Quick as had been the vanquished gambler's movements, those of Iron Fern were equally as swift. A revolver gleamed in his hand, a sharp report rung out, and Flush Font's weapon was torn from his hand by a bullet which splintered on the cylinder, filling his fingers with tiny particles of lead which stung like so many wasps. Then, as the hammer of the gold-mounted revolver rose by the pressure of a steady finger on the trigger, the Man of Iron hissed:

"Swallow those words or swallow lead!"

Flush Font saw the red glow in those steady, piercing eyes, and felt that it would be worse than rashness to hesitate. Slowly, and with a look that plainly told the effort it cost him, he apologized for what he had said. From that day he was Iron Fern's bitterest foe.

There was another and pleasanter side to the character of the Man of Fire. Once there came to Rocket Gulch a young fellow who was flush from the recent discovery of a rich-gold pocket filled with yellow nuggets. The young fellow—a mere boy—was fresh from the East, a veritable tenderfoot. Elated by his good luck, he indulged freely in liquor, and finally expressed a desire to try his hand at draw poker with the best man in the camp. Several sharks were ready and eager to fleece the lad, but he had heard of Iron Fern and would play with no one else.

The Man of Fire smiled scornfully when the young fellow challenged him to play.

"I am not robbing babies," was his reply.

At this the young man became fearfully enraged.

"I am no baby!" he cried. "I am your equal any day. You are called the champion card-sharp of this camp, and if you are not a coward you will play with me."

That word "coward" stirred the sport's fiery blood. The red light leaped into his eyes, and in a calm tone which belied the flush upon his face, he said:

"You have said enough. Were you a man, I would drop you in your tracks for that insult. As you are only a boy, I will teach you that you know nothing at all of poker."

They sat down to play, and in less than an hour's time the youth had parted with his for-

tune. The final pot was a heavy one, and the young man attempted to bluff on one small pair. Iron Fern did not hesitate to see the young fellow's reckless bet and go him better. Finally, the youth dashed the cards on the table, uttering a cry of despair as he declared that he was ruined. The Man of Fire smiled grimly as he dropped his cards face upward upon the table and raked in the pot.

Another cry came from the young man's lips as his eyes fell upon the exposed cards and he saw that Iron Fern had only held queen high.

Quickly the youth drew and cocked a revolver, which he placed against his own head. But ere the weapon could be discharged, the sport wrested it from the mad boy's hands.

"Fool!" he exclaimed. "Would you kill yourself?"

"Yes," was the reply. "I am ruined! With that gold I could have made my poor old mother comfortable during the rest of her life. Now she will die in the poor-house. Give me that weapon that I may blow out my worthless brains!"

But Iron Fern did not give up the weapon. He arose and led the lad out of the saloon, and, as they paused beneath the stars, he thrust into the youth's hands the gold that he had won from him.

"Take it!" he commanded hoarsely. "Take it and go back to that poor old mother. You should thank God that your mother is yet spared to you. And, above all things—avoid liquor, and shun such dens as this in which to-night you gambled away a fortune. It is well for you that you fell into my hands, instead of the hands of the sharks which infest the place."

That night the youth disappeared from Rocket Gulch, and perhaps his mother is alive to-day to thank Iron Fern that she was not left in the poor-house to die.

One day the stage brought a closely veiled woman to Rocket Gulch. She was a petite, graceful creature, every movement lending new charms to her delicate, well-rounded figure. Her shapely hands were concealed by gloves, but one could well imagine that they were white, soft and beautiful. As she stepped down from the stage, the spectators caught a glimpse of a dainty little foot and a small, round ankle. The baffling veil effectually concealed her features, but, there was not a man who saw her alight but would have sworn that the face beneath was beautiful. About her appearance there was a nervous, half-frightened air that captured the hearts of half-a-score of rough fellows, any one of whom would willingly and gladly have become her protector.

Within the hotel, peering from a window, was a small, smooth-faced man who uttered a suppressed exclamation of excitement, and started back as his eyes fell upon the veiled woman.

"At last!" he exclaimed, beneath his breath. "She has come! I lost her trail, but knew that she was steering this way. She cannot escape me again."

Then he turned swiftly and left the room.

The Man of Fire was also a witness of the arrival of the veiled woman. The moment he saw her appear in the door of the stage he started and gazed intently at her, muttering in a low tone:

"Good heavens! Is it possible?"

Eagerly he noted every movement as she left the stage. He held his breath, hoping that she would lift that heavy veil; but she did not. His eyes followed her up the steps till she disappeared through the doorway.

"My God!" he gasped, his face white and bloodless and his hands tightly clinched. "Can it be? Am I awake, or am I dreaming? That form—every movement—is hers; and yet, why should she be here? For three years I have fought the wild desire to go to her. Can it be that fate has brought us together again? Heaven forbid!"

Taking care that he was not observed by the veiled woman, Iron Fern followed her into the hotel. He found that already she had asked to be shown to a room and had passed up-stairs.

"I will see that face," he mentally declared. "She must not see me, but my time will come to peer beneath that veil."

He then learned the number of the room given to the new guest, and, with a strange feeling of mingled elation and dread, discovered that it was next to his own—the best room in the house.

The veiled woman did not appear beyond the limits of her room again that day. Her meals were carried to her, and the gossip-lovers suddenly awoke to the fact that there was a mystery in their midst, for it was whispered that

the woman still wore the heavy veil even within her room!

That night Iron Fern lay awake to hear soft footsteps that carelessly paced up and down the floor of the adjoining apartment. Slowly the hours wore away till midnight came; still that same soft, ceaseless walk continued. Once or twice the man thought he caught the sound of a suppressed sob. As he lay there all the blood in his veins seemed turned to liquid fire, and the impulse was almost resistless to batter down the frail wall which separated them and go to her. He was sure that she needed his aid and protection, yet cruel fate had placed an insurmountable barrier between them.

The night was far spent when he fell asleep, only to dream of her rapturously beautiful face, of her sweet, musical voice and rippling laughter.

After breakfast the following morning, Iron Fern lit a cigar and sauntered leisurely away down the gulch. Soon a bend hid the camp from his view, but still he walked on, his head bowed in a deep reverie. He must have traveled nearly two miles, when he paused and seated himself on a boulder beside the trail.

A few moments later, the sharp clatter of iron-shod hoofs came to his ears. He looked up swiftly to see a horse and rider come sweeping around the bend from Rocket Gulch. The rider was the mysterious veiled woman.

Straight by the man on the boulder galloped the horse. The woman was looking straight ahead through the folds of her veil, and did not observe him. In a moment horse and rider disappeared around the winding walls.

Barely had they vanished from view, when the sound of a revolver-shot came to the hearing of the Man of Fire, followed by a sharp shriek of fear or pain.

With a fierce cry, Iron Fern sprung to his feet and dashed forward. Within a minute's time he came in sight of a riderless horse that was galloping away down the gulch. Then he saw a small, dark form lying silent and motionless beside the trail. Swiftly he ran forward and knelt beside the fallen woman. The thick veil had been torn away, and, as he dropped beside her—her silent, beautiful, bloodless face was revealed to him.

A cry that seemed wrung from the depths of the strong man's heart burst from his lips.

"God in heaven! Lona, my wife!" he shrieked.

CHAPTER II.

A BLOW FROM THE SHOULDER.

For a moment Iron Fern stared wildly at that pale beautiful face, his whole form convulsed with emotion. All color had left his own face, and for a time it seemed that his heart ceased to beat. His breath came in gasps, and he appeared like a man wounded unto death. Just then the Man of Fire seemed more like a man of clay. Then his lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Finally, in a whispered sob, he uttered:

"She is dead! My darling—lost to me forever!"

He wrung his hands in a helpless manner. His whole form swayed to and fro as if moved by a strong wind. For the time he appeared like one who had suddenly become demented.

"No! no!" he hoarsely gasped. "She is not dead! I cannot lose her now!"

He gazed earnestly into her face, but there was no sign of life there. She did not breathe; not even an eyelid quivered to tell him that her spirit had not taken flight.

A sudden calmness took possession of the man. He ceased to wring his hands and gazed silently down at her.

"It is better so," he whispered. "We were forever separated in life. Death alone can reunite us. She is so beautiful, and yet how false she was! Her perfidy drove me to become the reckless, contemptible thing that I am, and yet I have no reproaches to utter. She is dead, and all is forgiven!"

He began to look for a wound, but failed to find anything but a swollen bruise upon her head, which had forcibly struck the ground when she fell from the horse. He sprung to his feet and glared around.

"Who fired that dastardly shot?" he hissed, his eyes beginning to glow with the old red light, as he scanned the rocky walls with a piercing glance.

There was no answer to his question. There appeared to be no living thing in sight save a lazy wheeling vulture poised in the air overhead. The immediate vicinity seemed deserted save by the tall, handsome man and the silent, unconscious woman.

Once more he bent over her, his eyes feasting

on her fascinating beauty. How fair and pure she looked as she lay there, pale and helpless as a broken lily! It did not seem that she had ever been capable of deceit and treachery. He had loved her once, how dearly none but himself could tell. He had heard those white lips, then ruby red, whisper a loving pledge to be his forever. He had held her in his arms and pressed his own lips to hers, again and again. Ah, now he thought that it had been better if death had claimed them both at that moment. How much anguish and suffering it might have prevented!

Uttering a cry of mingled emotions, he stooped and lifted her in his arms. The very touch of her seemed like magic. His heart gave a great leap and his blood danced madly through his veins. Swiftly he kissed her on the brow, the lips.

"She is mine!" he whispered. "My wife in the sight of God! We were legally married. Even though she may have forgotten her marriage vows, she is mine. How I loved her! I love her still!"

He clasped her tightly to his breast. Had she been conscious, his grasp would have hurt her. He trembled like a leaf, and again he pressed passionate kisses upon her face.

"She may not be dead," he cried, a hope growing within him that she wasn't. "She may only be stunned. I will see."

He laid her down in a comfortable position, and quickly drew a small flask of liquor from one of his pockets. Iron Fern never touched liquor as a beverage, yet he kept some by him constantly to use in case of an emergency like the present.

He poured a few drops through her clinched teeth and bathed her temples with it. In a few moments he was gratified to observe a slight flutter of returning consciousness. Like a gentle breeze her soft breathing fell upon his hand, and a faint murmuring sigh came to his ears. Never had the man heard music which sounded sweeter to his soul.

"She lives!" he whispered, rapturously. "Thank God for that!"

For a few moments all the old pain and despair were forgotten in the joy of knowing that his darling was not dead. Who can tell what bright visions of future happiness floated before his mental vision in that short space of time.

Slowly the color came back to her lips and cheeks. Her bosom rose and fell with her gentle breathing. And, as he sat beside her, it seemed to him that never had she been so beautiful before. His eyes feasted on her loveliness, and his heart beat strong and hard like the regular strokes of a hammer.

For a time she lay with her eyes closed, and it seemed as if she were sleeping. He sat there gazing down at her face, and feeling that he would be content to remain thus forever. He almost feared to have her open her eyes, for it seemed that then the sweet spell would be broken.

She sighed softly and a faint whisper came from her lips. He bent forward eagerly to hear what she said, and thought he caught his own name as it passed those sweet lips. Regardless of everything, he caught her in his arms and held her close to his heart, kissing her and whispering:

"Lona, my wife! My treasure, you are alive, and once more I hold you in my arms!"

A faint smile of happiness flitted across her face, and slowly she opened her dark eyes and gazed straight into his own shining orbs. To his dying day Iron Fern never forgot that rapturous look of joy, love and perfect content. In an instant he knew that she still loved him.

Her lips parted, and she faintly breathed:

"Neil!"

Never had that name sounded so sweet to his ears. Often had he heard her speak it, but never before had it stirred the very depths of his soul as it did then. In the ecstasy of his joy he could have crushed her to his breast, but his better judgment prevented. He only held her fast and gazed silently into her face.

She seemed perfectly content to lay there, with her head against his throbbing breast. It seemed right that she should be there, and for a time she did not question how she came thus. The memory of the past and its bitterness was blotted out by the joy of the present.

"My darling!" he muttered, as he bent and kissed her.

The touch of his burning lips aroused her. Like a flash memory threw its dark veil over the rapture of the moment. Faintly she struggled to escape from his arms.

"Lona! Lona!" he murmured, and still held her fast.

"Let me go!" she panted.

"No! no!" he replied, hoarsely. "You are mine! I cannot—will not let you go!"

"You must!" she declared, wildly. "You do not know what a dreadful creature you are holding!"

Ah! He felt that he knew only too well. Those words restored his reason. He unloosed his grasp and allowed her to slip to the ground. Then he staggered to his feet, and stood with hands tightly clinched, looking down upon her.

She covered her face with her small, gloved hands, and her slight form trembled like a slender reed. A heart-sob of anguish came from her lips, but no soothing tears dimmed her eyes.

He folded his arms, and for a time stood looking down at her without speaking. It seemed as if the barrier that had been almost swept away had again risen between them.

After a few moments he stooped and touched her shoulder, saying:

"Lona!"

She glanced up, a wild, haunted look gleaming in her eyes.

"How came I here?" she cried. "What has happened? Where am I?"

"You are in Rocket Gulch, about two miles from a camp by that name. You came here on horseback. Your horse became frightened at something and threw you. I found you lying unconscious on the ground."

"Yes, yes; I remember. I saw him at the hotel in the camp—the little sleuth-hound! I pretended to hire a horse to go for a ride; but I paid for it, and I was going anywhere so that I might get away from him."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Oh! that dreadful man who is following me. He would drag me to prison—to the gallows! But he never shall! I will kill myself first!"

"You speak in riddles. Who is following you, and for what?"

"For murder!—murder!" she gasped, as she tore the glove from her right hand and held up the slender, white fingers before him. "That hand did it! That hand caused his death!"

She arose and stood before him, a look of horror on her beautiful face.

"I killed him," she declared; "but, God knows I did not mean to. Oh, Neil! Neil! If you ever loved me, you will despise me now, for I am a murderer!"

He shrank back, his face transformed with amazement. She saw the movement, and a cry of heartfelt agony came from her lips. She felt that now, indeed, that man whom she loved dearer than all the world hated and abhorred her.

"Neil, my darling!" she wailed. "How I have loved you tongue cannot tell. And now you hate and despise me. This is worse than death!"

Those words touched his heart. Was she a murderer? What cared he? She loved him! She had confessed that she loved him. He had read her love in those dark eyes ere she spoke. What could separate them now?

He sprung forward and clasped her again in his arms. She had seemed about to fall as he caught her. A moan of relief escaped her lips as her head rested against his breast.

"I will protect you," he declared. "They cannot take you from me. You are safe."

She made no response. Indeed, her tongue refused to move. She felt his strong arm around her; she felt herself pressed close to his breast, and almost swooned for joy.

Again he murmured:

"I care not what you have done. Though both your hands are red with blood, I will protect you. You are my wife."

Instantly she tore herself from his grasp, and stood panting before him.

"I am not!" she cried. "I am not your wife! You were false—false!"

He looked amazed.

"Not my wife?" he repeated. "Lona, you are mad! Legally, in the sight of God and man, you are my wife. No matter what has happened since that fateful midnight marriage four years ago, you are my wife."

"No! no!" she wildly declared. "I never married you. You were false to me!"

"False!" the word came sneeringly from his lips. "False—never! But you—barely was I away ere you forgot your marriage vows. You are the one who was false!"

"You are wrong. I was driven to what I did. Never for a moment, Neil, has my heart been false to you."

"Driven to what you did? Why did you not show your certificate and declare that you were married? Why didn't you do this, instead of surrendering to the wishes of your greedy,

covetous parents? But again, I say you are mine for all of the past. You are my wife, and no other living man has a claim on you."

"Ah-ha! I beg to differ!" said a smooth voice, and a small, smooth-faced man stepped into view from beyond a clump of bushes. "I happen to have a claim on this lady that it is my professional duty to enforce."

The woman uttered a shriek and stood staring with distended eyes at the small man.

At the sound of his voice Iron Fern had wheeled like a flash. In a moment the red light had leaped into his eyes, and in a suppressed tone, he asked:

"Who are you?"

The little man bowed.

"I am a detective, sir," he replied; "and it is my unpleasant duty to arrest this lady."

He advanced and laid his hand upon the shoulder of the cowering woman.

Then Iron Fern's fist, driven straight from the shoulder, caught the detective fairly under the left ear, hurling him senseless to the ground!

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN'S PASSION.

FAR up the rocky wall crouched the person who had fired the shot which frightened the horse ridden by the veiled woman.

Amid some bushes which grew upon the edge of a rocky shelf, knelt a woman who wore a black mask over her face. In her hand she held the revolver with which she had fired at the veiled woman.

A low cry of triumph came from her lips as she saw the horse spring to one side, and heard Lona's shriek as she fell to the ground.

Away went the riderless horse down the gulch, but the woman lay quite still on the rocks where she had fallen.

"I have killed her!" hissed the masked woman. "I meant to do it, but feared that I should fail. Fortune directed that bullet, and she is out of my path forever. She came here to rob me of his love; but, Neil Fernald is mine, mine, and no human being shall stand between us!"

She bent forward, and gazed down at the silent form below. Then she again drew back the hammer of the revolver which she held, and pointed the weapon at the unconscious form. Ere she could fire, Iron Fern came dashing into view.

The masked woman drew back with a gasp of surprise.

"It is Neil," she whispered to herself. "How came he here?"

Then she saw the Man of Fire run swiftly forward and kneel beside the senseless woman. She heard the cry that came from his lips as his eyes fell upon Lona's face, and she ground her teeth with rage, as his passionate words came to her ears.

"She is not his wife!" gasped the masked woman. "Yet he still thinks so. Would to Heaven that he loved me as he does her! But, he shall—he must! She is dead, and now he is mine!"

With gleaming eyes she watched the scene below.

She heard Iron Fern's passionate utterances; she saw him clasp Lona in his arms, and cover her face with kisses, and she came near shrieking aloud with rage. Beneath her breath she hissed:

"Kiss her! kiss her! She is dead! She will never know! I would give my life—I would sell my soul to be held thus in your arms for one minute. Oh, Neil, Neil, how I love you! How I love you!"

She drew far back from view when Iron Fern sprung to his feet and glared around for the one who had fired the shot. He did not see her, although she trembled lest he should.

She saw the man produce the flask of liquor and pour a few drops into Lona's mouth; she saw him bathe the unconscious woman's temples, and, with hushed breath, she awaited the result.

She did not hear his rapturous whisper of joy when he discovered that Lona was not dead, but something seemed suddenly to whisper in her ear that she had not killed her hated foe.

"I have failed!" she exclaimed, in a whisper. "She is still alive; but she may die—she may die! I hope she will! Oh, heavens, if she recovers to find herself in his arms! The thought is maddening!"

She saw him again clasp the woman to his breast, but she could not hear his murmured words of love. Suddenly a fierce rage seized

her, and she drew back the hammer of the revolver, and pointed the weapon straight at the two forms below.

"I could kill them both!" she breathed. "I could kill them in a moment. Two shots—perhaps one would do it. I have half a mind to do it. That would end it all in a moment."

For several seconds she seemed on the point of firing. At last she lowered the weapon.

"No! no!" she said. "I will not do it. They would die in each other's arms—happy. Even that joy is denied me. I will wait. He shall yet be mine. He shall tell me of his love even as he is whispering it to that woman now."

She witnessed Iron Fern arise to his feet and stand gazing down at Lona, who had buried her face in her hands. The masked woman's eyes gleamed through the eyeholes, and had her face been exposed to view it would have been a study.

Lona's declaration that she was a murderer came plainly to her ears, and breathlessly she listened to what followed. It was with difficulty that she repressed an outburst, when she heard Iron Fern declare that he loved and would protect Lona even though her hands were stained with blood.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured. "What would I not give to hear him tell me that. He is mine, but she has robbed me of his love. I failed to kill her to-day, but she shall die!—she shall die!"

A cry of joy came near bursting from her lips as she witnessed what followed; and when the little detective appeared and attempted to arrest Lona, the masked woman half rose to her feet. She sunk back again as she witnessed the terrific knock-down blow delivered by the iron fist of the Man of Fire.

As Iron Fern knocked the detective senseless, Lona turned with a cry and ran swiftly down the gulch. The Man of Fire gazed intently at the fallen man for a moment, and then turned and watched Lona's fleeing form. For a time he hesitated whether he should pursue her or not. A sudden resolve seemed to come over him, and he turned swiftly to retrace his steps toward Rocket Gulch.

The masked woman watched him till he disappeared; then she sprung to her feet. Thrusting the small revolver into a pocket concealed in the folds of her dress, she started swiftly to descend into the gulch. A narrow, dangerous natural path ran down the rocky wall, and along this she picked her way. It was slow and difficult work, but she finally reached the gulch bottom.

"Now I will overtake her," she cried, in a low tone. "She shall not escape me again."

Away she ran in pursuit of Lona, who had disappeared. She was a swift runner and now sped along with every nerve strained in the endeavor to overtake the fugitive. Soon she came in sight of Lona. The girl had run until nearly exhausted, and was now walking slowly and aimlessly down the gulch.

"I will catch her," panted the masked pursuer. "She is mine! mine! mine! I missed her once; next time I will be so near that I cannot miss."

Gasping for breath, she ran on. Soon she was so near Lona heard her swift footsteps and looked around in sudden alarm. Uttering a cry of fear the unfortunate woman again started to flee.

"Stop!" cried the masked pursuer; "stop, I say!"

But, these cries only served to accelerate Lona's speed. She was nearly breathless from her recent run yet for several rods she almost flew over the rough ground. Suddenly her strength failed. She could run no further, and with a look of despair on her beautiful face she turned toward her pursuer.

In a few moments the masked woman came up, panting and breathless.

"Who are you?" asked Lona, tremblingly. "What do you want?"

For a time the masked female did not reply. Finally she said:

"Back in Rocket Gulch I am known as Madam Mask. What I want you shall soon learn."

There was a wild gleam in her eyes that terrified Lona. Her voice, which was filled with suppressed passion, sounded strangely familiar.

For two minutes, at least, the women stared fixedly at each other. Then Madam Mask spoke:

"You are beautiful. It is useless to deny that. Your beauty won his love. He was captured by a handsome face. The face beneath this mask is far from ugly, yet he does not love me."

"He? Who? What do you mean?" cried Lona.

The mask did not heed her question. Calmly she continued:

"You are beautiful, yet you are a murderer. For all of that, he loves you still. Many have called me beautiful, but my hands are not stained with crime. Yet he does not love me. To-day I shall become a murderer, too."

"Are you mad?" gasped Lona.

"Perhaps so," admitted Madam Mask, still calm and self-possessed. "I am mad with love—mad with hate. I love him; I hate you. Were you removed, possibly I might win his love. I shall kill you!"

A shriek burst from the terrified Lona, and she shrunk back, trembling with fear. She thought that the masked woman must be mad, indeed.

"You are afraid!" hissed the strange creature, her eyes twinkling like ebony balls. "You fear death, yet a little while ago you would have died happy in his arms."

"Who are you?" Lona asked again.

"I am a woman, like yourself," was the reply—"a woman with human passions. I love; I hate. Only one living man ever won my love. You robbed me of that, and I will have revenge."

"I don't know you. I am sure I never harmed you."

"You are sure! Yet you won Neil Fernald's love. Only a few short minutes ago he held you in his arms and whispered loving words in your ear. I saw it—I, who would give my life almost for one loving word from his lips. He called you his wife; but you are not his wife. You shall never be his wife. Never! never! NEVER!"

The final words were almost a shriek. She started forward, and Lona retreated, trembling with fear.

"I will kill you!" she cried.

Suddenly she produced the revolver. Lona saw the weapon, and uttered a gasp of terror.

"Don't! don't!" she begged.

An almost maniacal laugh burst from the masked woman's lips as she cocked the weapon. Lona turned, and, frantic with fear, ran swiftly away. Madam Mask threw up her hand, took a quick aim and fired.

At the same instant the fleeing woman fell to the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAGIC MIRROR.

WITH bowed head, the Man of Fire walked back to the camp of Rocket Gulch. Not once did he lift his eyes from the rocky trail before him as he pressed swiftly forward. His hands were tightly clinched and his lips pressed firmly together. His face was as calm and impassive as a stone, but that wild, red light still shone in the depths of his eyes.

Straight to his room in the hotel he went, and it was high noon ere he again appeared.

It did not take Iron Fern long to discover that Lona had not yet returned to the hotel. For a moment a look of surprise and alarm swept over his face.

"Strange," he muttered. "I expected that she would return. Where can she have gone?"

After asking himself this question, he bowed his head in deep thought. Finally, he glanced up, a startled look upon his face.

"Can it be?" he exclaimed. "I was a fool to leave her thus, but in the excitement of the moment I did not pause to think."

In a few moments, however, he learned that the little detective had returned to the camp. That quieted his fears from that source, but left him quite at a loss to account for Lona's absence.

"She is not in his power," said Iron Fern; "and yet she has not returned. I should be at her side to protect her, but between us there is an awful chasm dug by her own fair hands."

An hour later he was standing on the steps of the hotel, watching for Lona's return, when a small boy suddenly appeared before him.

"Hullo, mister," saluted the ragged urchin. "I reckon you're the feller wot they calls Iron Fern, hain't ye?"

"Sure, Johnny," replied the man, as he glanced down at the boy's dirty face.

"Then this here's fer you," and the little fellow held out a small cream-tinted envelope.

Iron Fern took it with unfeigned surprise. Upon the envelope his name was written in a fine, delicate hand, plainly a woman's chirography.

"Hold on here," cried the Man of Fire, as the boy was turning away. "Who gave you this?"

The dirty little scamp laughed and winked significantly.

"You know," he grinned. "Reckon there

hain't meny women critters in this here hole, an' they are mighty few who would be after sendin' roun' sweet-smellin' pistles o' that kind."

Iron Fern held up a silver quarter.

"Who gave you this?" he repeated.

The boy's eyes glistened as he saw the money. "Thet female as wears a mask over her face an' lives in a little tent down this-a-way," he answered, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Reckon she must be dead struck on ye."

Iron Fern gave him the quarter and quickly tore open the envelope. Then he drew forth a small, delicately perfumed sheet of paper, on which was written the following message:

"To IRON FERN, THE MAN OF FIRE:—The mystic mirror reveals strange secrets of the past, present and future. Things of the past are recalled and mysteries of the future laid bare. The light of revelation is thrown along the path of life, and all its barriers and pitfalls revealed."

"The mirror has revealed to me things concerning you which it is well that you should know. Come to my tent at once, and with the mirror's aid, I will show you one whom you love and one who loves you dearly. I will show you the false and the true."

"This is not a trick to obtain patronage, but in truth I wish to reveal to you something which concerns you deeply. It is for your interest that you do not disregard this invitation."

"MADAM MASK."

Iron Fern uttered a low whistle of amusement and derision when he had read the letter.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "That is too thin."

He stared silently at the beautiful writing for several minutes.

"Is this a trick of my many foes?" he asked himself. "Do they think to decoy me into any trap? I have to be on the outlook for such little snags, and that is why I questioned that boy so closely. By heavens! If I thought it was?"

But, finally, he shook his head.

"Too open. They would not dare try it on in broad day. By gracious! I believe I will go."

He arose and walked along the main street of the camp. The fortuneteller's tent was situated on the outskirts, and he soon reached it. It was quite a commodious affair, and above the door was a sign which read:

"MADAM MASK,

The Female Wonder."

And upon the side of the tent, in a favorable position to be seen by those passing, was pinned a canvas, upon which was painted the representation of a mirror. Within the mirror were these words:

"Your past, present and future revealed by the Magic Mirror for Five Dollars. Satisfaction Guaranteed. If you do not recognize some of the scenes revealed by the Mirror as things which have transpired in your past life, your money will be Refunded."

Iron Fern entered.

The tent was divided into two apartments. Iron Fern found himself in one which contained a small table and two chairs. Seeing no one, he seated himself in one of the chairs and prepared to wait.

A minute had not passed when the damask curtains which divided the tent stirred slightly and then parted to reveal a handsome female figure standing before him. The perfect fitting garment which she wore, while it concealed her form revealed enough of its rounded, graceful outlines to make one feel sure of its finished beauty. Her face was concealed by a dark mask. A mass of midnight hair was coiled and twined upon her queenly head.

With one small, white hand she beckoned Iron Fern.

"Come," she said, in a strangely sweet and thrilling voice. "The magic mirror is beyond these curtains."

The Man of Fire started. He had often seen the masked woman but never before had he heard her speak. Now there seemed something strangely familiar about her form and voice.

He arose promptly and followed her beyond the damask curtains. The apartment beyond was so thickly curtained on either side and overhead that it was nearly dark within. Only a faint light struggled through the folds of the cloth.

Madam Mask pointed to a chair.

"Be seated," she said.

Iron Fern sat down. Before him he saw a structure that was completely concealed by curtains. This he thought was the magic mirror, and subsequent events proved his surmisal correct.

"These things which you will see in the mirror have all been revealed to me one by one when I was least expecting them," said the wo-

man. "First you shall look back into the past. Keep your eyes straight ahead, and do not speak lest you break the spell."

While she was speaking her voice had grown fainter and fainter, and when she ceased Iron Fern seemed to be alone.

Gradually a dim light which pervaded the whole apartment appeared. Where it came from the man could not tell. Slowly it grew more brilliant until the apartment was flooded with its radiant brightness.

The Man of Fire looked straight ahead, and though no human hand seemed to touch them, the curtains which concealed the magic mirror were removed.

Fernald saw before him what seemed to be a common mirror. Plainly he could see his own reflection in it. But gradually his form faded from view, to be replaced by that of another. The man had set his teeth, firmly resolved to show no surprise at anything he might see, but for a moment he came near breaking his resolution.

Before him, appearing as natural as life and seeming to be reflected by the large mirror, was a beautiful girl. She was attired in a plain but tasty short print dress, and her hands were filled with wild flowers. Around her neck was twined a wreath of buttercups and daisies. Her dark, curling hair, held back by a dainty ribbon, fell to her waist. Her face was as sweet and beautiful as a poet's dream. Her dark eyes seemed gazing straight at him, and as he looked her red lips parted in a smile. It seemed that she was about to speak.

What a great bound of commingled joy and pain his heart gave! How it pounded in his breast, and what a feeling of longing and regret seized him!

Before him he saw Lona, his love—Lona, just as she had appeared on that bright June morning when he first met her years ago.

In a moment she vanished from his gaze, and another scene appeared in the mirror.

How quickly he recognized the old, ivy-covered country church! It was midnight. Several dark figures were astir on the portico near the entrance of the vestry. He leaned eagerly forward and counted five forms. There were two figures which appeared quiet and passive like witnesses. There was a tall man and a closely-veiled woman who stood hand in hand. Before them was a man who appeared like a clergyman. He seemed to be speaking.

A marriage ceremony was taking place!

Gradually the scene changed. The group of three remained in the same position, but their appearance changed. The man was small, round-shouldered and unpleasant appearing; the woman, who was dressed in white, was divinely beautiful, yet how pale and despairing she looked! Now they were in a brilliantly-lighted room, and there were many people all about them. The clergyman was still speaking.

Again a marriage ceremony was being performed.

Only too well did Iron Fern know the pale-faced woman who was selling her soul for gold, and linking her fair young life to that of the repulsive man.

Involuntarily a groan broke from his lips.

In an instant the scene vanished, and another took its place.

He saw the interior of a sick chamber. On a bed lay the man who had married the beautiful girl. His face was convulsed as if with pain, and he tossed restlessly on the couch. The door of the chamber opened and the girl entered. She approached a table and soon produced a white powder from a tiny package which she took from her bosom. This she gave to the suffering man. Then she sat down by the bedside to watch and wait—for what? Gradually the man ceased to toss about upon the bed, and finally he seemed to sink peacefully to sleep. Then, bestowing an unfathomable look on the silent form, the guilty-appearing woman crept from the room.

The next scene revealed a coffin with a dead man lying in it. The sick man was through with his sufferings forever.

Swiftly the coffin faded from view, and in its place was seen a gallows. At the end of the rope that was suspended from the cross-beam hung a female form. The black cap was pulled down over her face, effectually concealing the features, yet the form seemed familiar to the horrified man who was staring into the magic mirror.

A gasp of horror burst from his lips, and he sprang to his feet.

"I have seen enough!" he cried.

In an instant Madam Mask was by his side. "Wait! wait!" she entreated. "There is

much more to see. You have only seen the false love who betrayed you, and then stained her hands with crime. You must see the true love, whose heart is still yours, and yours alone!"

"No!" he groaned. "I will see no more! I have witnessed enough of your vile trickery. I must go, ere I forget myself and shatter that fiendish mirror into a thousand fragments."

And, reeling like one intoxicated, he staggered from the tent.

CHAPTER V.

A GLIMPSE AT THE PAST.

HIGH up among the mountain crags a man was standing, with a powerful glass to his eye, gazing down into the gorges and ravines. From his elevated position he could plainly see the camp of Rocket Gulch, and could gaze far along the winding stage-trails which led away to the north and south.

Behind the man a narrow path led back along the jutting crag, and through a thick screen of bushes the outlines of a rude cabin could be seen. The hut was planted against what appeared to be the solid mountain wall.

From Rocket Gulch, some miles away, the cabin in the air was invisible. It had been built so far back from the edge of the cliff that it could not be seen from below. The thick bushes also aided in concealing it from view.

The man with the glass was not looking toward Rocket Gulch, but was gazing at two figures far down at the foot of the mountain. They were two women, and although the watcher could not hear their words, their vigorous gestures plainly told that an exciting scene was taking place.

The lone watcher was a tall, handsome, dark-faced man, whose eyes were dark and piercing, and who wore a drooping black mustache, which effectually concealed his mouth.

With the exception of a pair of stout leather leggings, which reached far above his knees, he was dressed as a professional card-sharp is often attired. The form concealed by the elegant dark suit was compact and well-built, showing unmistakable evidence of uncommon physical power. The hands which held the glass, although strongly knit, were long, slender, and white as a woman's.

"Who are they?" muttered the man, as he continued to gaze at the two females. "The one whose face is concealed is the mysterious fortune-teller of Rocket Gulch. But the other—who is she? A stranger in camp, I'll allow. I cannot get a square look at her face."

"But what can they be talking about? By their gestures, I should say that both are fearfully excited. If they were men, I should think a fight was pending. Now I don't know—Gods!"

This final exclamation broke from his lips as he saw one of the women turn and run as if for life. Then he saw the other throw up her hand. There came a puff of smoke and the fleeing woman fell to the ground.

"Good heavens!" cried the watcher. "That was murder!"

Keenly he watched the masked woman. He saw her pause a moment and gaze steadily at the fallen, motionless form; then she turned and fled away toward Rocket Gulch.

"I must go down there," declared the man in some excitement. "I must see who that unfortunate woman is. If she is dead, Madam Mask shall be called to an account. She is worse than a fiend."

Swiftly he closed his glass and thrust it into a handy pocket. Then he turned and hurried down a winding and difficult path.

It was some time ere he reached the gulch bottom and stood above the silent form of the unfortunate Lona. A cry of mingled emotions broke from his lips as he saw the woman's beautiful pale face, and quickly he knelt by her side.

"Great heavens!" he gasped. "It is Lona—Lona, my darling! For two years she has been lost to me, and at last I have found her—dead!"

He lifted her in his arms and gazed wildly into her white face. He called her endearing names, and like one demented, entreated her to speak to him. Then he kissed her cold lips and laid her gently down.

"If she is dead," he cried, "I swear by the Power above to wreak vengeance on that fiend who killed her!"

Then he began to search for a wound. In a few moments, he exclaimed joyfully:

"She is not touched! She still lives! She must have tripped and fallen just as that woman

fired, thus escaping the lead. She has swooned from fright and excitement."

Again he lifted her in his arms and arose to his feet.

"I will carry her up to the Roost," he said.

He walked swiftly along to where the path led upward out of the gulch. Still bearing the unconscious woman in his arms, he undertook the ascent. He soon found the task to be a difficult one, and before he reached the jutting crag far up the mountain-side, he was compelled to pause and rest a score of times. Finally, panting and breathless, he staggered along the path, passed through the screen of bushes and entered the cabin, the door of which was standing open.

In one corner was a rude cot of blankets and skins, and on that he placed the unconscious woman. Then he sat down to rest.

As he sat there, a slight moan came from Lona's lips. The man started and muttered:

"She is recovering. Perhaps it is best for her not to know who I am for a time."

He arose swiftly and approached a small closet at one side of the room. He opened the door and took from a shelf within a heavy black beard. This he quickly adjusted to his face, making him appear at least ten years older than he was. When he turned around, he found that Lona had recovered and was gazing wildly around the room.

He walked slowly toward her, but she started in alarm, faintly crying:

"Who are you? Where am I?"

"I am a friend, and you are safe." He spoke in a smooth, low tone.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Nothing serious," was his quiet reply. "Don't give yourself any alarm. Everything is all right."

She sank back, closing her eyes and looking very white. For a moment the man feared that she had swooned again, but pretty soon she again opened her eyes and glanced around the room.

Lona could not remember what had happened. In vain she tried to recall the exciting events of the day. Her mind seemed in a whirl, and she could only remember a confusion of things. Of course she could not tell where she was or how she came there. She did not recognize the tall, black-bearded man, but he had spoken kindly, and she did not fear him.

Had she known who the tall man was, she would not have fallen asleep as peacefully as she did within the hour!

While she slept, with one arm curled above her shapely head, he came to her side and looked down upon her, his arms folded upon his heaving breast.

"Sleep on, my beautiful one!" he whispered. "How fair—how lovely you are! And you are all mine! I have bartered my soul for you—stained my hands with the greatest of crimes—and long I feared that I had lost you. For two years I have sought in vain for you, but you have come to me at last and never again shall we part. How I love you! How a man must love who will commit the terrible deed that I did in order to secure the object of my passion!"

For a few moments he was strongly tempted to stoop and press passionate kisses on those sweet red lips, but he refrained, fearing to awaken her.

"Hold! hold! Have caution!" he breathed, softly. "Your time is coming, oh, burning heart of mine! She is yours and yours alone! Not all the world can take her from me now. Once more the future looks radiant! Love and happiness lay before us!"

Lona slept for hours. When she awoke, she discovered that she was alone in the cabin. A small stand stood beside the couch upon which she reposed, and on the stand were a few dishes containing food. She discovered that she was very hungry, and at once sat up and partook of the victuals provided.

Soon she had satisfied her hunger and attempted to arise, but quickly discovered that her legs were very weak and would scarcely bear her weight. With a faint sob, she sunk back upon the couch and covered her face with her hands.

Having slept little for several nights, Lona was yet far from being rested. As she lay there, vainly trying to group together the disjointed scenes which her memory recalled, she once more fell asleep.

When she awoke it was night. A bright light was burning in the cabin, and near at hand sat the tall, black-bearded man. He saw her open her eyes and stare fearfully at him, and he said, softly:

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Clayburn."

"Mrs. Clayburn!" she fairly shrieked, as she sprung to her feet. "Who are you? Why do you call me that?"

He bit his lip in vexation. He had made a blunder in speaking that name. What was to be done?

"Sit down, please," he said, coaxingly. "I am your friend, never fear."

"I don't know you," she declared; "yet you call me by that name—that hated name!"

"If you will sit down, I will tell you who I am," he smiled.

She sank down on the couch, staring at him with a hunted look in the depths of her dark eyes.

"Look well at me," commanded the man. "Don't you recognize me?"

She passed her hand across her forehead and gazed searchingly into his face.

"You look familiar," she admitted; "but my head is so queer."

"Let me recall some of the scenes of the past, then perhaps you will remember. Are you willing to listen?"

She did not speak, and he continued:

"Three years ago you met Mark Clayburn for the first time. You were young and beautiful, as you still are to-day; he was middle-aged and an invalid—a hopeless asthmatic. But, he was rich. His wealth excited the cupidity of your parents, and within a few months they forced you into a repulsive marriage with him."

A moan broke from the beautiful woman's lips. "True! true!" she sobbed. "A hundred times I was tempted to kill myself ere my life was bound to his. Would to God I had done so!"

"It was a cruel sacrifice," admitted the man.

"At the wedding you met for the first time Mark Clayburn's half-brother, Fontray Delmont. The moment his eyes rested on your peerless face and form, Fontray fell madly in love with you. He had never loved his half-brother, and from that moment he had hated him."

"And I—I abhorred him!" panted the woman.

"Six months passed, and one night Mark Clayburn breathed his last on earth. He had been sick for several days, but no one thought the sickness dangerous. He had had hundreds of other similar and more distressing attacks. In the morning, when Fontray Delmont entered the room where his brother lay, he found a corpse."

"I killed him! I killed him!" gasped Lona, wringing her hands wildly. "I did not mean to! I gave him the sleeping powder, but the physicians pronounced it to be poison. I did not know! No! no! I did not know!"

"Yes," continued the man, "he was poisoned. Suspicion turned on you, but, ere you were apprehended, Fontray Delmont discovered your danger. Although you were a murderer, he was as madly in love with you as ever, and he resolved to save you. It is needless to tell how he succeeded in spiriting you away beyond the reach of the law. This he did, sending you to a place where he hoped soon to join you. But when he came to search for you, you were gone and he could find no trace of you. For two years he has been searching everywhere, and at last he has found you."

"Then you are—"

"In Rocket Gulch I am known as Flush Font, but you know me by my true name."

With these words, he removed the heavy beard. She saw his face and gasped:

"Fontray Delmont!"

CHAPTER VI.

"SHE IS MY WIFE!"

FLUSH FONT had been seen to carry the unconscious woman up the mountain path to the cabin on the crag—the "Roost," as he had called it.

The unlucky detective who had run against Iron Fern's hard fist witnessed the difficult ascent.

"Who is that man?" muttered the woman-hunter. "Can he be this ferocious Man of Fire? He is tall and well-built like that man, and yet he seems different somehow. This is unpleasant business, hunting down a handsome woman, even though she is a murderer, but when Selim Scott tackles a case he never turns back."

At dusk the detective stole cautiously up the mountain. The shadows of night were gathering thickly in the gorges and ravines and the last gray light of dying day was fading from the mountain peaks. Ere he had made half the ascent, mountain and valley were hidden by the darkness.

The little sleuth did not see a tall man with

gleaming eyes who followed cautiously in his footsteps. He little dreamed that he was "shadowed."

Selim Scott reached the mountain crag and saw before him a light which shone from the cabin window. With the stealth of a creeping panther he stole forward, making scarcely any perceptible noise. Passing around the corner of the cabin, he crouched beneath the window and listened.

Plainly he heard voices, a man's and a woman's. They were talking earnestly, and he ventured to lift his head and peep in at the window.

He saw within the cabin the man and woman, Fontray Delmont and Lona Clayburn. Again he had run his game to earth.

Breathlessly he listened to Delmont's story of the marriage and murder, and again heard Lona confess that she killed her husband.

"She is mine!" whispered the detective. "I will take her back and claim the reward. I must not be chicken-hearted now."

Swiftly he stole around the cabin and paused at the door. Only for an instant he halted, then he leaped against the door and burst into the cabin.

The man and woman sprung to their feet in alarm.

Leaping to the side of Lona Clayburn, Selim Scott grasped her arm firmly, crying sharply:

"I arrest this woman for the murder of Mark Clayburn, her husband!"

Lona uttered a shriek and sunk helpless to the floor. The little detective stood above her, glaring defiantly at Flush Font, who for a moment seemed stricken motionless with surprise.

Finally, the tall man demanded:

"Who are you?"

"I am a detective, sir, at your service," bowed Selim Scott.

"A detective!" hissed Delmont, his face transformed by rage. "Why are you here?"

"That's a silly question," replied the little man, bluntly. "You just heard me say that I arrested this woman for murder. What more do you want?"

"Fool!" snarled Flush Font. "You have come here alone for her, have you?"

"No, not alone," was the quick reply. "I took this along for company."

A revolver gleamed in the detective's hand.

A sneering smile swept over the tall man's face. He calmly measured the detective with his eyes, the look of contempt growing deeper on his face. He stood with his left hand in one of the side pockets of his coat while his right carelessly stroked his long dark mustache.

"It is a pity for such a good-looking weapon to be lagged around by such an insignificant creature," he sneered.

"You will find that I know how to use it if you give me cause," declared Scott. "Throw up your hands!"

"What for?"

"It makes no difference what for. Up with them!"

Flush Font did throw up his hands, but as the left one came from its resting-place in that side pocket of his coat it held a self-cocking revolver. The next instant there was a flash and a heavy report, and Selim Scott reeled back and fell to the floor!

With the still smoking revolver in his hand, Delmont sprung forward and gazed at the silent man whom he had remorselessly shot down. The little detective lay upon his side, the hand that still grasped the revolver being doubled under him.

"That settles him!" muttered Flush Font, an unfeeling laugh breaking from his lips. "He never will bother you any more, my dear Lona."

"Have you killed him?" she whispered, in a horrified manner.

"Well, it looks that way," admitted the man. "Flush Font seldom wastes lead."

"Oh, how could you?" she gasped. "You are a murderer!"

"Lona, I am ready to do anything for you," he replied. "This man was a sleuth-hound who was on your trail, determined to drag you to the gallows that he might obtain a paltry reward for his work. I have removed him forever, and, for the time being, you are safe."

"You did this for me!" she shrieked. "I was the cause of his murder, and his blood is on my soul! I am doubly a murderer! Oh, Father in Heaven! what will my punishment be?"

She covered her face with her hands and gasped for breath like a strangling person. At that moment she suffered all the tortures of the damned.

Delmont witnessed her agony and his own hard heart was wrung with pain. With his own face marked by tender sympathy, he approached and touched her on the shoulder, saying softly:

"Lona!"

She started away from him as if his touch had scorched her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, springing to her feet and standing before him with blazing eyes. "Don't touch me! Your hand is red with blood! You did it for me, you say! Thus you heap another crime upon my soul! Don't touch me!"

Her wild excitement was painful to witness. The strong man shivered as he looked at her face now haggard with despair.

"Lona!" he repeated.

She looked straight at him, a light in her eyes that he had never seen there before.

"Don't!" she gasped—"don't call me by that name. That is the name my mother gave me; that was the name of an innocent, thoughtless girl. Don't call me that!"

"You are crazy!" exclaimed Fontray.

"Would to God I were!" she moaned, as she flung herself face downward on the cot.

He stood looking longingly and lovingly at her for a few moments, then he bent over the silent detective. The fallen man's hat lay on the floor and in a short time Flush Font found the wound upon his head. He examined it closely and then uttered a smothered exclamation.

The man was not dead!

The bullet from Delmont's revolver had plowed along the man's skull, making a furrow in his scalp, but had only stunned him for the time. Within an hour, if unmolested, the detective would be himself again.

"Lona!" he cried. "Lona, the man is not dead!"

She uttered a shriek and sprung up from the couch. With one bound she was by his side, grasping him almost fiercely by the shoulder.

"What do you say?" she gasped. "Not dead? not dead?"

"That's what I said. Here is where my bullet plowed along his skull, simply stunning him for a time. A dozen such scratches would not kill a man. He will soon be all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. There is not a doubt of it."

"Thank Heaven!" she murmured, and burst into tears.

Staggering to the couch, she once more sunk upon it, abandoning herself to a perfect torrent of sobs and tears.

"Perhaps that is the best thing that could happen," thought Delmont, and indeed it was. Her overtaxed nerves had been so worked upon by the excitement of the hour, that relief from some source was positively demanded. A fit of weeping was the easiest and most natural way of removing the tension.

Stooping, the man lifted the unconscious detective in his arms and bore him from the hut.

"My bullet failed to do the work," he muttered, as he reached the open air. "I will now make sure of the job. She will never know, and the sleuth will be forever removed from the trail."

Straight to the edge of the precipice he bore the unconscious man. There he paused and gazed down into the blank darkness.

"He will be dashed to death on the rocks below," said Flush Font to himself. "He is unconscious now, and will never know what happened. It is an easy death."

Far away the lights of Rocket Gulch were atwinkle, but he did not glance toward them. For an instant he held the helpless man out over the abyss. He hesitated ere he loosed his hold. It was a terrible thing to do, but the dark-faced man was capable of terrible deeds.

He let go his hold and the body shot downward into the darkness!

Turning swiftly, he hurried back to the cabin. He did not see a dark form which had suddenly appeared on the crag and stole silently along in his footsteps.

Flush Font entered the cabin and found Lona still lying on the couch, her form shaking with suppressed sobs. He stopped beside her and gazed silently down at her graceful figure.

How he longed to take her in his arms and kiss away the tears which dimmed her eyes! How he longed to whisper his love in her ear and feel her soft arms clinging around his neck! He felt ready to do anything possible for mortal man to do if thus he might win her love.

He bent over her again, repeating her name in soft accents. She did not stir or look up. He laid his hand on her arm, and still she did not stir.

"My darling!" he whispered. "Cease your

weeping. You are safe with one who loves you dearer than life."

Still she did not heed him, but continued to sob as if her heart were breaking.

"Oh, Lona," he murmured, as he bent until his hot breath fanned her cheek, "your grief is painful to me. Every sob cuts my heart like a knife. Why do you weep? You are safe—safe with me; and I love you so dearly!"

She seemed to shrink from him, but this only fanned his passion into a more lurid flame. In an instant he caught her in his arms and pressed burning kisses on her face.

Like a whirlwind, a dark form burst into the cabin. Then came a hoarse, angry shout, and Lona was snatched from Delmont's arms. At the same instant Flush Font was hurled headlong to the floor.

The astonished card-sharp looked up to see the fiery eyes of Iron Fern glaring at him over the leveled barrel of a heavy revolver held in his right hand. On his left arm the Man of Fire supported Lona.

"Ha!" snarled Flush Font, staggering to his feet. "How came you here?"

Iron Fern did not reply; he only glared straight at the cowering villain, his eyes seeming to gleam more redly than usual. "Speak, you devil!" hissed Delmont. "What do you want?"

"I want this woman!" was the reply.

"What is she to you?"

"She is my wife!" thundered the Man of Fire.

CHAPTER VII.

DOWN TO DEATH.

FLUSH Font looked amazed.

"Your wife?" he repeated. "Man, you are crazy!"

Iron Fern did not speak, but continued to glare at Flush Font, a terrible purpose gleaming in his fiery eyes. The card-sharp saw the look and trembled with fear, for he knew that his life hung by a thread.

"Don't shoot!" he implored.

"And why not, you miserable cur?" gritted the Man of Fire. "Why should I spare your worthless life?"

"Why should you shoot me down in cold blood?" asked Delmont. "What have I done?"

"What haven't you done? How came this woman here? By what right do you hold another man's wife in your arms and press kisses on her face? Answer that."

"She has no living husband. Mark Clayburn is dead."

"What care I for Mark Clayburn!" sneered Iron Fern. "I am this woman's husband!"

For an instant Flush Font came near calling him a liar, but fear restrained him. He saw the muzzle of that never quivering revolver frowning upon him, and knew that it would only take a pull upon the trigger to send a bullet through his heart. Iron Fern never missed.

"What do you mean?" demanded the fuming villain.

"I mean just what I say," was the reply. "I married this woman ere she ever saw Mark Clayburn. Though she may have been married a dozen times since, she is still my lawful wife."

These words staggered Flush Font. Iron Fern appeared to be speaking the truth, yet how could it be? Lona was a young and thoughtless girl when he had seen her become Mark Clayburn's wife. Could it be that she had married this man of the fiery eyes ere her union with Clayburn occurred?

"I do not believe it!" he snarled, forgetting his caution. "Iron Fern, I believe you lie!"

The Man of Fire thrust Lona behind him. Weak and dizzy, she reeled back against the cabin wall.

"Have you a knife, Flush Font?" asked Iron Fern, in a cold, even tone.

"Yes."

"Then draw it and defend yourself! I will meet you with a similar weapon, thus giving you an even chance for your life."

In an instant a keen blade gleamed in Delmont's right hand. A similar weapon quickly took the place of the revolver in Iron Fern's hand. Then, crouching in their tracks, the two men glared fiercely at each other.

"You shall never leave this cabin alive, Iron Fern," hissed Delmont.

The Man of Fire did not reply, but advanced slowly toward his foe.

Suddenly Flush Font stamped sharply on the floor.

In an instant the floor beneath Iron Fern's feet gave way, and the Man of Fire uttered a cry of alarm, as he shot downward through a cunningly arranged trap-door into some kind of a pit beneath the cabin.

A cry of joy and satisfaction burst from Flush Font's lips as Iron Fern disappeared, and running swiftly forward, he peered down through the trap into the blank darkness.

"Reckon that salts your bacon!" laughed the triumphant villain. "You have gone down to death, for no man ever escapes from that hole alive. Flush Font is the victor, and the fair Lona is his and his alone."

In an instant Lona was beside the trap.

"What have you done?" she shrieked, as she stared down into the darkness. "Neil! Neil! where are you?"

There was no answer to her cries. All was silent as death below.

"He is dead!" she wailed. "Dead! dead! And I love him so dearly! I have nothing to live for! I will die with him!"

She was on the point of leaping down through the trap when Flush Font sprung across and caught her in his arms.

"Madwoman!" he gasped. "What would you do?"

"Let me go!" she cried. "He is dead, and I would die by his side! Let me go!"

She struggled to free herself from his arms, but he held her fast.

"Stop!" he commanded. "You know not what you are doing!"

She struggled on with the strength of despair. He had all he could do to hold her. Once she came near dragging him through the trap. Her desperate energy seemed almost unlimited.

"Lona!" he panted. "For God's sake, stop!"

But she struggled until exhausted, then sunk helpless at his feet.

Muttering a thankful exclamation, Delmont quickly closed the treacherous trap. It had served his purpose well, but came near depriving him of the woman he loved, as well as his bitter foe.

He lifted her in his arms and once more carried her to the couch. She was conscious, but so weak and helpless, that she could offer no resistance. She lay on the couch without uttering a sound save an occasional gasp. Several times Delmont called her name, but she heeded him not.

Drawing a stool near the couch, the man sat down upon it and waited. A look of grim determination rested upon his face.

An hour passed, and then Lona stirred, uttering a low moan. He bent toward her, saying softly:

"My darling!"

She turned her dark eyes on him, and in their depths was a look of the most unutterable loathing and fear. The man saw it and ground his teeth furiously.

"You have killed him!" she muttered. "He is dead, and you are his murderer!"

"What was that man to you?" demanded Delmont. "Surely not what he claimed—your husband?"

She did not reply. She only gazed at him scornfully—loathingly. For a moment he shrank back before her steady look. Then he uttered a hard laugh.

"It makes little difference. He is disposed of, and will trouble me no more. Every obstacle is removed from my path, and you are mine, mine! You shall become my wife."

"Never, you detestable murderer and villain! You have me in your power now, but I will take my own life ere I will submit to you! I care not for death; it has no terrors now."

"Lona, your words cut my heart like knife-strokes. You know not how dearly I love you. If you will marry me, we will go far, far away to some distant land, where I will devote my whole life to the sweet task of making you happy."

He paused, but she did not speak. He drew nearer, and she shrank from him.

"My beautiful one," he whispered, thrillingly. "My heart is mad with love for you. You can never know the depths of my passion. What would I not do to win your love? With you a dreary desert would be a paradise; without you the fairest spot on earth would be a desolate waste."

She heard his passionate words, and for the time seemed bound by some strange spell. She could not stir. He drew still nearer, and gazed straight into her dark eyes. The serpent was fascinating the dove!

"We will go far away," he murmured. "We will leave the hateful memories of the past behind. In a land beyond the sea we will find a

home where love and happiness shall reign supreme. We will forget the bitter past, and live only for the future."

His breath was on her cheek; his eyes seemed gazing down into the depths of her soul. Still she did not move. Then he reached out and attempted to take her in his arms. His touch aroused her.

"You are a murderer!" she shrieked, as she started to her feet and stood panting before him. "Don't touch me!"

Then her whole heart burst into one wild, sad, passionate cry:

"Neil! Neil, my lost love!"

She clasped her hands and swayed to and fro, moved by the power of her emotion.

Fontray Delmont arose to his feet, his whole face black with rage. For the time the devil within him triumphed over his calm judgment.

"Call for him!" he hissed. "Cry loudly; he cannot hear you! You are mine—mine, body and soul! I claim you now, and death itself alone can take you from me!"

He sprang forward and grasped her. Frantic with fear, she struck blindly at his face. The blow fell fairly between his eyes, staggering him for an instant.

A snarl of fury escaped his lips, and he held her crushed against his breast until she ceased to struggle, exhausted.

"I will tame you yet," he declared. "You shall learn to be as submissive as a kitten. I will place you where you will be safe for the time."

He bore her straight to the cabin wall, which seemed planted against the mountain-side. Reaching out, he touched a hidden spring, and a door swung open, revealing a dark opening beyond. Through this doorway he stepped without a moment's hesitation, closing the door behind him.

Darkness surrounded them. Not an inch could the man see, yet he walked boldly along as though perfectly familiar with his surroundings. In despair the woman had abandoned all efforts at resistance. She felt herself borne along through Stygian gloom, and thought she was going to her doom.

Finally Flush Font halted. He placed Lona on her feet, but still held fast to her. Then came a creaking sound, as of a heavy door turning on rusty hinges. Once more she was lifted and borne forward a few feet.

"Here we are, my beautiful one," announced Fontray Delmont, as he once more placed her on her feet. "Now, if you will remain standing a moment, I will strike a light."

A second later he lit a match. Then he approached a lamp, which was suspended before him. Soon a bright light illuminated the place.

Lona looked around and with a feeling of wonder saw that she was in a small cavern chamber. A soft carpet covered the smooth rocky floor, and beneath the lamp, which was suspended in the center of the chamber, was a table, on which lay books, papers, and various things to amuse an idle mind. Near by stood a large easy-chair. Within the chamber was also a couch of blankets and skins similar to the one in the cabin on the cliff.

"There," said Delmont, "try to make yourself comfortable here for a time. I am sorry that necessity compels me to fasten you in here, a prisoner. I shall call and see you often. Within ten days I hope to leave this part of the country forever, taking you with me."

He took down a small tin lamp from its resting-place on a rocky shelf and lighted it. Then, with one last word of adieu, he turned and left the chamber, closing and locking the massive door behind him.

Along a winding passage he made his way, descended a flight of rude stone steps and soon swept away the curtain which hung before the opening to another chamber.

A glance showed him four rough-looking men who were sitting around a table playing cards. On the table were several piles of coin, plainly indicating that they were gambling.

This chamber was also a small one, and was evidently used as a sleeping-apartment, as there were several bunks around the walls.

The air of the place was filled with tobacco smoke, for every man had a pipe in his mouth.

They all looked up as Flush Font appeared.

"Johnson," said the man by the curtain, "another prowler has dropped through the trap into the Death Pit. I wish you would look into the place and see if he is finished. If he is not, complete the job."

"All right," was the gruff reply.

Then Delmont dropped the curtain and turned away from the chamber.

CHAPTER VIII.

ESCAPE AND RESCUE.

Down into the darkness shot Iron Fern, the Man of Fire. The trap-door had dropped from beneath his feet with a suddenness that had not given him a moment's warning. Almost before he knew that anything unusual had happened, he was through the trap in the floor. A gasping cry broke from his lips, and he made one wild ineffectual grasp for the edge of the trap.

How far he fell he did not know. He struck on his feet and was dashed forward on his hands and knees among the rocks. His head came in violent contact with something and for one instant he was stunned.

Flush Font's sneering, triumphant laugh, although it sounded leagues away, aroused him. He was lying on his side, but his head had fallen between two stones in such a position that he was able to look directly upward. Far, far above he saw the square hole in the floor through which he had taken the fearful plunge. Even then he could not tell how far he had fallen, but it seemed a fearful distance. Indeed, it was a miracle that he had escaped instant death on the jagged stones amid which he lay.

As he looked upward he saw Flush Font's dark, sinister face as that individual peered vainly down through the trap. He heard the villain's harsh, triumphant words, then he saw another form beside the trap.

It was Lona—Lona, his wife! He saw her as she gazed downward into the dark pit, and he heard her wild cry of:

"Neil! Neil! where are you?"

Vainly he attempted to answer. His tongue refused to move, and his voice died away in a faint gurgle.

Then Lona's despairing wail came to his ears, and he witnessed her attempt to spring through the trap. He saw Flush Font spring across and catch her in his arms, and then he knew no more for a time.

When he again became conscious, he found himself still lying among the rocks. All was black darkness above and on either hand.

He attempted to move, and to his surprise found that he could not stir. Vainly he struggled. He seemed bound by some terrible spell.

His head felt queerly. It seemed surrounded by an iron band that each moment was drawing tighter about it. His temples throbbed and his blood poured through his veins like molten fire. Still he could not stir!

It was a horrible feeling to experience. He felt that he was going mad. He tried to cry out, but still he could not. He thought that he was doomed—doomed to die in that terrible place. He would lie there among those jagged rocks until he perished of hunger and thirst or that terrible iron band crushed his skull.

He thought of Lona. The woman of a beautiful face and form, yet with a heart so false. How he had loved her! How he still loved her! And she—after all, she still loved him. While still his lawful wife, she had sold herself to another—sold herself for gold! But that other was dead—dead, and she still loved her true husband!

Suddenly a perfect frenzy seized him. She was in the hands of his worst foe. What a terrible fate might be hers! Fiercely he struggled to throw off the spell which held him motionless—and succeeded!

He lifted his head and a hollow groan broke from his dry lips. He moved with difficulty, but his heart was filled with joy because he could move at all. With a great effort he sat up and stared into the black darkness.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, harshly, and the sound of his voice filled the place with hollow echoes. "I live! I move again! Flush Font has not seen the last of the Man of Fire. He shall yet quail before me like the miserable coward that he is."

He attempted to get upon his feet, but at that moment his legs refused to support him. He sunk forward on his hands and knees, uttering a groan of anger and dismay.

"What is the matter with me?" he moaned. "I feel so queer! My head swims and my flesh burns. What is this that is crushing my head? Am I dying? No! no!" he gasped. "I will not die in this hole. I will live—I will escape, and then, Flush Font, beware!"

He crept slowly around on his hands and knees. He felt sharp, jagged rocks everywhere, and wondered how he had escaped death upon them. Suddenly he stopped with a gasping cry.

Before him, lying on the ground, he plainly saw the dull, gleaming outlines of a human skeleton. The bones glowed with a whitish, phosphorescent light, and the skull was grin-

ning in that horrible, mocking manner peculiar to human skulls.

He reached out and touched it. It moved beneath his hand, and slid down from the stone on which it was resting. He could not refrain from shuddering with horror.

"Some poor devil who has met death in this horrible hole," muttered the Man of Fire. "This is a regular death-trap. I believe I am in the hands of the Vultures, and that Flush Font is their chief."

And he was right.

The Vultures were a band of robbers and ruffians who had long terrorized the surrounding country. It was thought that their place of retreat was somewhere near Rocket Gulch, but no one had succeeded in discovering it. Several had found the cabin on the mountain, but usually it had appeared bare and unoccupied. If any one thus far had found it tenanted, he had not lived to tell of it. By the robbers the place was called Vultures' Roost.

For some time previous to the opening of this story the Vigilantes of Rocket Gulch had been so active that the Vultures were compelled to lie low. It was thought by many that the band had been frightened out of the country, but a greater mistake was never made. They were only lying low, biding their time to make a big scoop. And while honest people congratulated themselves on the disappearance of the Vultures, the robber chief walked unsuspected through the streets of Rocket Gulch.

Iron Fern finally crept to the wall of the pit. Placing his hands against the cold ledge, he succeeded in arising to his feet.

"I will explore this place and discover what kind of a hole I am in," he declared. "It is not impossible but I may find a way to escape."

He started slowly forward, feeling his way along by keeping one hand against the wall. Suddenly he stopped, uttering a sharp exclamation.

"Fool!" he cried. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

Quickly he reached into one of his pockets and drew forth a small, well-filled match-safe. It took but a moment's time to secure and strike one of the matches. Then he held the tiny light above his head, and peered searchingly around.

The pit was small and circular. The dim light showed him that, and also revealed, set within a depression at one side, what appeared to be an iron door. By the light of the dying match he crossed the rocky bottom of the pit and stood before the door. Then the match went out.

He quickly lighted another and eagerly examined the door. It was set in the solid rock, and appeared firm and immovable. He tried to open it, and found the effort useless. It would not stir.

"I am hopelessly shut into this hole!" groaned the Man of Fire. "Unless some one comes, I shall die here. Some one comes! Who will come, unless they do so to make sure that I am already dead? But if they do come they will find me very much alive. Woe to the man who enters here!"

His second match died out, leaving the place again in darkness—black, dismal darkness!

"What am I to do for a light?" gasped the man. "It is terrible to remain here in the dark. I would not mind so much, but a cold hand of iron seems pressing on my forehead. A strong hand that is slowly but surely crushing my skull. My legs tremble. I never knew them to before. How my heart pounds and my temples throb! I believe I am going mad!"

He sunk down beside the iron door, once more feeling weak and helpless. For a time he lay there, gasping for breath and muttering wildly, incoherently. Suddenly he rose up before the door and beat against it with his bare fists. He only succeeded in causing his knuckles to bleed, and when the fury of the moment was spent he sunk down once more exhausted.

He lay there a few moments, his head in a whirl. Suddenly to his ears came the sound of heavy footsteps advancing beyond the door. His heart gave a great bound, then he stood still. He held his breath and listened.

Some one was coming!

A gleam of light stole into the pit from beneath the door. The footsteps paused beyond, and a moment later a key was fitted into the rusty lock.

In an instant the Man of Fire was his cool, calculating self. Noiselessly he arose to his feet, one of his deadly revolvers in his hand. He reversed it, firmly grasping the barrel, and then crouched breathlessly in his tracks.

The rusty bolt turned with reluctance; the heavy door swung slowly on its hinges. Then

one of the Vultures, bearing a light, stepped into the pit. Evidently he was not thinking of danger, for he took no precaution.

Down came the revolver with all the force that a strong man could muster. It struck the man fairly between the eyes, knocking him senseless to the floor. The lantern which the fellow carried fell on its side, but Iron Fern quickly caught it up.

The Man of Fire bent over the ruffian and looked searchingly in his face. The features were grim and repulsive, plainly telling how heartless was the chosen executioner of the helpless victims who were unfortunate enough to see the interior of the Death Pit.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Iron Fern. "It strikes me that you ran against a full-grown surprise. You expected that I would be killed or disabled by the fall, but I was not. I am a hard man to kill. I shall live to meet Flush Font face to face once more."

He dragged the unconscious man further into the pit, then turned and left the place. He closed the iron door behind him and locked it. Then he removed the keys and dropped them into one of his pockets.

He turned and made his way along a winding passage. He did not go far before he paused at the head of a flight of rough stone steps and listened. The sound of voices had come to his ears, and a moment later he heard a burst of coarse laughter.

"Yes," he muttered, "I am in the den of the Vultures. There is no doubt of it. But what do I care? Iron Fern is able to take care of himself. I am going to leave this place and woe to the man who stands in my path!"

He did not descend the steps but continued along the passage. He soon noticed an iron door set in the wall and similar in appearance to the one to the Death Pit. He stopped and look curiously at it.

There was a small aperture in the upper part of the door and through this shone a light. He advanced noiselessly and peered through the aperture. He saw the interior of a small chamber, and stretched prone upon the floor he observed a familiar form. A great cry came near breaking from his lips.

Was that Lona? Her face was turned from him, but surely that was Lona's form. She had thrown herself down in a perfect abandonment of despair, and her dark, unloosed hair lay in a tangled mass about her head and shoulders. Swiftly he noted every rounded outline of that beautiful figure. Yes, that was Lona!

Was she dead? The thought struck him motionless for an instant. What if she was? Perhaps it was better for them both if she was. What was there to live for? The past had been full of bitterness; would not the future be shadowed by the blackness of sin and despair?

Producing the bunch of keys which he had retained, Iron Fern tried them one by one in the lock. Finally, he found one that threw back the bolt. The door swung open and he entered.

The woman still lay motionless on the floor. He approached and stood beside her; still she did not move. Then he bent over her and whispered her name.

In an instant those dark eyes unclosed. She saw him, and what a glad, choking cry of joy broke from her lips. He lifted her to his breast; her arms were about his neck, and for one mad, joyous instant their lips met.

"Oh, Neil!" she panted. "Neil, my life! my love! You are not dead! You are alive, and you have come to take me from this dreadful place!"

"Yes," he answered, hoarsely, "I have come for you—I have found you! We will never be parted again in life or death—in life or death!" She clung close to him and repeated:

"Never—in life or death!"

"We will leave this cave together never to return," said Iron Fern. "Come."

He placed her upon her feet, but weak with excitement, she could not stand.

"Never mind," he said; "I will carry you. Here, take the lantern and hold it so the light will shine along the path. With your other arm cling tight about my neck."

Again he lifted her in his arms. Nerved by some strange power, he scarcely felt her weight. She clasped her arm about his neck; her head lay against his, and his dark hair fell all about their shoulders. Then he bore her away along the winding passage.

That journey through the mountain caves seemed more like a dream than anything real. There was but one passage that wound away they knew not where. Blindly Iron Fern followed it, hoping to reach an opening in time, and he was not disappointed. They descended

two rude flights of steps and at last came to an opening screened by thick bushes. Through those they forced their way, and finally found themselves in the open air, just as the full round moon showed itself above the eastern peaks.

CHAPTER IX.

SAVED—FOR WHAT?

"THANK Heaven! we are out of that horrible place."

It was Lona who spoke. The Man of Fire looked into her face but did not reply.

They were some distance below the mountain crag on which was built the cabin in the air. The moonlight which flooded the scene revealed a narrow path which descended the mountain.

Iron Fern's eyes still blazed with a steady unnatural glow and that hand of iron was still pressing on his forehead. Wild, fantastic visions seemed passing before his gaze. His face was flushed and his flesh burning hot.

"We will go down," he finally said.

His voice sounded strangely, causing Lona to look swiftly into his face. There she saw something that made her shudder.

"I can walk now," she declared.

He placed her on her feet, but still held fast to her arm. Slowly they went downward.

"Never—in life or death!" repeated the strange man several times.

Finally they stood on the brink of a precipice near which ran the path. Iron Fern stopped and peered over the verge.

The moonlight did not reach the valley far below. It showed the rocky heights all around them, but far below was a sea of darkness.

For a long time the man of Fire continued to gaze downward. He seemed to be controlled by a strange fascination, and for several minutes he scarcely breathed. Lona also held her breath. She knew not why, but a feeling of terror stole over her and held her spell-bound.

Up from the valley floated the long-drawn mournful cry of a mountain wolf. The sound seemed to break the spell, for Iron Fern started and began to mutter wildly:

"Oh, no; we'll make no feast for you. You are far down—far down. We are not coming there. You are down among the rocks. We will not fall upon the rocks. No! no! We'll make no feast for you."

Lona was speechless with horror, for she felt that she was in the hands of a madman. It was plain that something had shaken Iron Fern's wonderful nerves and made him demented for the time.

"Look, Lona, my love!" he cried, drawing her nearer the brink. "Down there lies a beautiful sea—the dark sea of death. How fitting it would be for us to float away together on its bosom!"

She looked downward and could discern the dark sea which his imagination viewed as the sea of death. Below the point where the liquid moonlight bathed the rocky steeps with mellow glory lay the gulf of gloom.

Again the man murmured:

"My darling, we will never again be parted in life or death. The years have been so long since we stood hand in hand together. My heart has been bitter with anger and my soul has slowly been eaten by despair. But once more you are mine. I have seen the love-light in your eyes—I have felt your arms about my neck—I have heard your lips speak loving words. All the old dead passion has returned, and never again will we be parted in life or death!"

Suddenly she seemed to catch the wild spirit which controlled him. Swiftly her fear and horror vanished. What had she to live for? What cared she for death? Softly she whispered:

"Never, Neil!"

"There is only one way to escape such a fate," he continued. The law's iron hand will tear us apart in life, but in death nothing—nothing can separate us. Together we can leap from this cliff into the dark sea of death and be borne away on its bosom. Come!"

He seized her unresisting form in his arms and was about to spring out into space when he was suddenly seized from behind and dragged back from the brink. A sharp voice cried:

"You are mad!"

The Man of Fire released his hold on Lona and endeavored to break the clasp of those arms which were locked about his body. Struggling desperately, the two men fell to the ground.

For a moment Lona stood motionless, then in sudden terror, she fled away down the mountain-path. On, on, she ran, panting and gasping, stumbling and falling, then struggling up and hurrying on.

How that terrible night passed she never could tell. Morning came and found her wandering aimlessly along a narrow valley far from the den of the Black Vultures. Finally she came to a deserted cabin set in the midst of a thick scrub growth.

"I am so tired," she murmured. "I will rest here. They cannot find me."

Within the cabin a few dead boughs lay in one corner. She lay down upon these, and was soon fast asleep.

Slowly the hours wore away. The sun mounted high in the heavens, and still Lona slept. What fate directed the footsteps of her bitterest foe to that spot? How illy she would have rested had she seen the gleaming, triumphant eyes which peered in at the door! She did not hear the low, suppressed laugh of fiendish triumph which came from the lips concealed beneath a dark mask.

Unconscious of her danger, the sleeping woman stirred and murmured as if dreaming pleasant things. A smile was on her face, and the name of the man she dearly loved came from her lips.

How those dark eyes blazed through the twin holes in the mask. Madam Mask stood over the sleeping woman, and in her right hand gleamed a dagger.

"Dream of him!" she hissed, as she crouched by Lona's side. "Murmur his name! It is the last time that you will have a chance to do so on earth! He never shall see you again! Never! Twice I have failed to take your life; the third time has come, and you shall not escape. Lead has not accomplished the work, but steel will!"

Again Lona murmured in her sleep. The words were low and indistinct, causing the masked woman to bend low in order to hear them. A light of savage joy gleamed in Madam Mask's eyes as she listened.

"She dreams of me," muttered the woman, with the dagger. "She fears me, and well she may. How I hate her! She is so fair—so beautiful! Yet those soft hands committed a crime! For all of that, he loves her. He loves her, while I perish for one tender glance from his eyes. But he shall never have her! She shall die!"

The gleaming dagger was raised, and the woman bent forward to strike. Then Lona opened her eyes, and gazed up at the dark figure above her.

A gasping cry of fear broke from the threatened woman's lips, and then she struggled to arise.

"Lie still!" hissed Madam Mask, as with her left hand she pushed Lona back upon the dead boughs. "Don't attempt to escape, for if you do, I shall kill you instantly!"

Powerless with fear, she could not but obey. She gazed shudderingly at the dagger held in the masked woman's right hand.

"Who are you?" she gasped.

"I am your bitterest foe," was the reply. "I hate you so that I am determined to remove you from my path. Twice I have made the attempt, and failed each time. The third and last time has arrived. Pray, now, if you ever did!"

"Don't!" begged Lona; "don't strike me with that knife! I am sure I never willfully harmed you. Why do you hate me so?"

"I told you once," was the reply. "I hate you because Neil Fernald loves you. He is lawfully mine, yet he cares not for me. You have bewitched him!"

"Who are you?"

"Who am I? I am Neil Fernald's wedded wife!"

Lona uttered a cry.

"No! no!" she gasped. "You are not—"

"Agnes Braddox—yes!" and Madam Mask tore the covering from her face.

The features revealed were those of a woman of twenty-five or six. She was unmistakably beautiful, yet about her mouth just then there was a heartless, cruel look. Her black eyes were filled with a look of unutterable hatred.

"Oh, Agnes!" cried Lona, starting up. "Surely you would not harm me! We used to be such friends—such dear friends!"

"That was long ago," was the reply—"long before he came. I looked upon you as a thoughtless child. I did not fear your fair face then. But when he came to see me, you won his love."

"Oh, I did not mean to—I did not try! I don't know why he loved me."

"But he did—that was enough. All my artifices to turn his attention to me were failures. He was wildly enamored by your baby face, and every effort was vain."

"Yes, he asked me to be his wife," murmured

Lona. "I promised that I would. But he was false! When I failed to escape from the house and meet him at the old church, he married you."

"True," assented the strange woman. "He married me; yet it is not in Neil Fernald's heart to be false. I was vailed, and he thought that he was marrying you."

A cry burst from Lona's lips.

"Is this true?" she gasped.

"True as gospel. When the ceremony was finished I fled from his detaining arms. In the morning, according to arrangement, he departed for Colorado to look after some mining property there. To this day he believes that he married you."

"And he was not false to me as I thought," cried Lona.

"No; but you shall never have him. You die now!"

And springing upon Lona, she once more raised the glittering dagger. At that instant her uplifted wrist was caught by a man who had noiselessly entered the cabin. In a moment the knife was wrenched from her hand, and she was lifted to her feet and sent reeling across the room.

"Just in time to block your little game," cried Flush Font, as he caught Lona in his arms. "I will take care of this woman whom you seem determined to murder."

Lona had been saved from the madwoman's gleaming dagger, but might it not be for a fate more terrible than death at the hands of Madam Mask?

CHAPTER X.

HEART TO HEART.

IRON FERN had been seized about the body in a manner that made it impossible for him to exert his wonderful strength. Vainly he tore at the hands which were clasped in front of him. Vainly he sought to twist himself around so that he could face his unknown assailant.

Back from the verge of the abyss he was dragged, and like wild animals the men struggled on in silence. Finally they both fell to the ground; still the grasp of the unknown remained unbroken. Furiously the Man of Fire struggled, but every effort was impotent to accomplish his object.

"No, you don't!" the unknown panted. "Lie still, you tiger. You can't break the grip of Selim Scott."

Those words told that Iron Fern's assailant was the little detective. How had Scott escaped death when dropped from the crag by Flush Font?

It happened that Delmont had dropped the unconscious man directly down upon a scrub pine which grew on a small shelf some distance below the crag. The hardy little tree had broken the man's fall, and detained him on his downward plunge to death. When he recovered consciousness he escaped from the tree, picked a perilous path along the steep mountain-side, and finally reached a place of comparative safety. As luck had it, he was in a position to prevent Iron Fern's mad act.

As the Man of Fire heard the detective's words he renewed the struggle with redoubled fury. From side to side he dashed, in a wild endeavor to break that strong grasp. Suddenly Iron Fern's head struck sharply against a large boulder, and with a groan he sunk back unconscious.

Releasing his hold, the detective arose, panting and gasping, to his feet.

"That is the worst tussle I ever engaged in," Scott declared. "If I hadn't got a regular death-grip on him, he would have got at me. And if he had—"

He stopped speaking abruptly and shook his head. The Man of Fire lay flat on his back, his upturned face appearing white and ghastly in the moonlight.

"He's a handsome man," Scott continued, "but a perfect devil when he gets started. I would rather the Old Boy himself would get after me than Iron Fern. I believe that he is two-thirds crazy. His talk a few minutes ago sounded loony."

He bent forward and peered sharply into Iron Fern's face. He saw that the man was apparently stunned in such a manner that he would not soon recover consciousness.

"I can't stop to fool with him," muttered the detective. "I don't know as I want to, anyway. It may not be healthy for a fellow of my size around here when he recovers. I think I will overtake the woman. She cannot have run far."

But Selim Scott underestimated the strength which terror had given the woman. He soon

discovered this as he hurried down the mountain in a vain attempt to overtake her.

For a long time Iron Fern was unconscious, and when he finally recovered, he found himself once more held motionless by a spell similar to the one experienced in the Death Pit beneath the cabin on the crag. He could not stir, try as he might.

The round moon was riding far up in the sky and the white moonlight fell all around the spell-bound man. All around brooded a profound silence, save when it was broken by the cry of a wolf or bark of a coyote. For a long time it remained thus, then Iron Fern finally thought he heard his name spoken softly by some one near at hand. A moment later his disordered imagination saw Lona, the woman whom he loved, bending over him. She stooped and lifted him in her arms. He wondered how she could do it.

She murmured in his ear:

"Never—in life or death!"

She bore him to the brink of the precipice, and now the abyss seemed filled with the sea of gloom. Near at hand on this dark sea rocked a handsome boat. She pointed away across the black waves to where a golden rainbow seemed an arch above the portals of glory.

"See," she whispered, thrillingly; "there lies eternity and happiness. We will sail away over this dark sea together."

She placed him on his feet and stepped into the boat. Instantly it sunk from sight, and she went down with it, uttering one wild cry which rung in his ears like the wail of a lost soul. Then he tried to hurl himself over the precipice, and once more became unconscious.

The moon had long ago disappeared behind the western peaks and the darkness which followed was being dispelled by the gray light of dawn when Iron Fern again recovered consciousness and sat up. He was still beside the boulder against which his head struck during his struggle with the little detective.

He rubbed his head and stared vacantly around. For a time his memory did not serve him at all. He arose slowly and painfully to his feet and staggered down the narrow path. Occasionally he uttered a meaningless laugh.

"I'm going down!" he muttered. "I've long been going down! I commenced to go down long ago, when I heard of her falseness. I've been going down ever since. Ha! ha! ha! I'm going down!"

At times the path skirted the brink of dangerous precipices. Yet he did not mind. He staggered on, at times seeming about to plunge headlong over the verge and fall upon the rocks far below. He laughed and even attempted to sing, but the song was a jargon of broken sentences and mingled tunes.

The path led around the mountain and did not descend into Rocket Gulch. He finally found himself in a small valley. Along this he wandered, going he knew not where.

The morning sun arose to find Iron Fern still wandering aimlessly along the valley. Suddenly to his ears came the clatter of a horse's hoofs. Instinct caused the demented man to spring behind a clump of bushes and crouch down.

A minute later Flush Font appeared, mounted on a powerful horse, and swept by, going down the valley. The moment he had passed, Iron Fern arose from his concealment and shook his clinched fists in the air.

"Go on!" he cried, furiously. "It is well you did not stop! You are a villain! I know you must be my enemy! I knew your face. You are in league with Satan! Go on!"

He followed the horseman down the valley. Slowly he wandered on, now and then stopping to rest. Higher mounted the sun and slowly the minutes passed.

All at once he was seized by a wild desire to find the woman whom he loved. He shouted her name again and again, but only the echoes answered.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Why don't you answer? Lona! Lona!"

He listened. The hoof-beats of a horse coming up the valley reached his ears.

"He is returning!" cried the Man of Fire. "He has taken her from me, but he shall pay the penalty. Let him come!"

Again he crouched in a place of concealment and again Flush Font swept into view. But this time the chief of the Black Vultures was not alone, for in his arms he bore Lona Clayburn, a helpless captive.

The ambushed man saw the captive's face and his eyes glowed redlier than before. A revolver gleamed in his hand.

"'Tis her—Lona, my love," he whispered; "and she is in the hands of that Satan's whelp!

I must have a care not to hit her when I fire. I will drop the horse."

Unaware of his danger Flush Font came on. Suddenly a revolver-shot rang out, and with one wild spasmodic leap, the horse fell dead. The man and woman were hurled headlong to the ground.

Springing from his concealment, the Man of Fire ran swiftly forward, the still smoking revolver in his hand.

Flush Font had struck the ground in such a manner that for the time he was rendered unconscious. Lona lay beside him, somewhat dazed, but comparatively unharmed. She looked up at Iron Fern as he reached her side, but did not speak.

The Man of Fire paid little heed to his fallen foe. One glance he gave toward Delmont, then turned to the woman.

"We meet again," he said, slowly.

She did not speak. Once more a feeling of fear stole over her. She looked into Iron Fern's face and saw something there that made her shudder. He bent over her and fixed his burning eyes on her face. She shrank from him.

"Don't do that!" he pleaded. "You look frightened, but you need have no fear of me. I would not harm you for the world. I love you too dearly."

"Oh, Neil!" she cried, with a burst of tears. "You are mad!"

He passed his hand over his forehead and looked at her queerly.

"What did you say?" he asked. "Mad? Am I mad? I don't know. My head feels so queerly. Perhaps I am, but I love you just the same. Did you hear me calling for you? I shouted your name, and the voices of the rocks and pines mocked me. You did not reply."

She did not look up. Her face was buried in her hands and the tears trickled between her fingers.

"Why don't you look at me, Lona?" he asked. "You should not weep—you should be happy, for are we not again together? And we will nevermore be parted—never, in life or death!"

But she did not lift her head. He replaced the revolver in his pocket, and stooping touched her on the shoulder.

"Come!" he whispered, softly. "We will go away from here—far away!"

She attempted to arise, she even succeeded in getting on her feet, only to sink forward with a low moan and he caught her in his arms.

"I am so weak!" she moaned.

"Never mind," replied Iron Fern; "I am so strong. I can carry you."

He forgot his own weakness of a few moments before. The very touch of her seemed to give him strength, and he lifted her as easily as if she had been a child. Her head lay upon his shoulder and a sudden calm seemed to come over her. A sigh of content escaped her lips and softly she murmured:

"Oh, Neil, my love! death with you is far preferable to life without you!"

And with her pulsing heart against his own heaving bosom, he bore her away like a weary child carried in the strong arms of a tender parent.

CHAPTER XI.

A CAPTIVE AGAIN.

ALONG the valley walked Iron Fern carrying the beautiful woman in his arms. He did not seem to feel her weight for a time. He walked along with a quick, firm step which betrayed little of his recent weakness.

Lona's head lay on his shoulder and her dark hair flowed down his back. The white, scared look had left her face, and the color was slowly returning to cheek and lip. His eyes were filled with a happy, contented light.

Finally, she whispered:

"Where are we going, Neil?"

He paused and gazed blankly around. A troubled look came over his face and he slowly shook his head.

"I don't know, he admitted. "I cannot tell."

"Are we going back to the mining camp?"

Again he shook his head and replied:

"I don't know."

"He is lost," she thought. "We shall wander among these mountains until we are exhausted and perish. We will die together and I am not afraid."

Once more the Man of Fire started forward, but now his steps were slow and uncertain. Gradually the weakness of a few hours before was returning. He staggered a little as he walked but still pressed forward. The lifeless horse and unconscious man were left far behind.

Finally Iron Fern became so exhausted that

he could carry Lona no further. Reaching a grassy spot, screened by some bushes, he placed her on her feet, but her legs were still too weak to bear her weight, and she sank to the ground.

"I cannot walk," she declared.

"Don't try," he said, as he sat down upon the ground. "We will remain here until the boatman comes."

"The boatman—whom do you mean?"

"The boatman—the dark boatman, who will ferry us over the black sea. He will come by and by and we will go over together. Beyond the dread sea lies Eternity."

"He still raves," she thought. "Poor Neil! That terrible fall through the trap in the cabin floor wrecked his reason."

He bent toward her, holding out his hand in a warning gesture.

"Hush!" he cautioned. "He is coming! Can't you hear the dip of his paddles? He is coming for us and we will go over together. There is happiness on the other shore."

The look on his face awed her. She gazed at him in wonder. His gaze seemed fixed on something far away and a look of peace and joy transformed his features. She held her breath, not daring to speak lest the spell should be broken.

Finally a look of disappointment stole over his face.

"What makes him so long?" muttered Iron Fern, impatiently. "He should be here now. Come on! come on!" he cried. "We are waiting."

"I must try to turn his mind from such things," thought Lona. "How can I do so?"

That was a difficult question to answer. At last, she said:

"Neil, listen to me."

"Be still!" he commanded. "Your voice drowns the sound of his paddles. I cannot hear them at all now."

"Neil, you must listen," she persisted.

Slowly he turned his eyes toward her. She did not wait for him to speak, but continued:

"I wish to speak of the past—"

"Stop!" he cut in swiftly. "It is dead and buried! Let it lay in its grave."

"Neil, I wish to correct an awful error of the past—one that has filled both our lives with sorrow and bitterness."

"Why speak of it? It can do no good. It is better to forget it all."

"But we cannot forget. If we could it would be different. As we cannot, it will be better to know the truth."

He did not speak, but gazed steadily at her. She took courage and continued:

"I thought you were false to me, and I made a terrible mistake by marrying another man."

"For gold! for gold!" he cried. "And you were then my lawful wife!"

"No," she declared, "I was not. It was an awful mistake. You never married me."

For a moment he gazed wildly at her, a most incomprehensible look on his face. Then he replied, more calmly:

"You are right; I did not marry you. You are a true, loving woman. I married a false, deceitful girl. How you have changed!"

"No, no!" and she wrung her hands in despair. "You must understand! I did not meet you at the old church that night—it was another."

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, hoarsely. "It was another—oh, yes, it was another! Hark! He is coming! I can hear the dip of his paddles again. It was another! Very true—very true! Listen! Can't you hear the paddles? Never in life or death!"

Once more she burst into tears. He was mad—hopelessly mad. She could not explain about that terrible midnight marriage which had wrecked both their lives, for he would not understand. She threw herself down upon the soft grass in an abandonment of grief.

"Don't weep!" entreated Iron Fern. "You should not fear him, for he will not harm us. He is only coming to ferry us over the dark sea together. Don't weep!"

She did not heed him. Her slender form shook with the great agony that she suffered. He sat there looking down half-wonderingly at her.

The minutes slowly passed, and gradually her sobbing ceased, but she still lay with her face buried upon her arms. After a time she slept from sheer exhaustion and weakness.

She knew not how long she lay there, but when she awoke Iron Fern was gone. She started up, gazing wildly around her, but no one was in sight.

"Where can he be?" she murmured. "Can it be that he has wandered away and left me here alone?"

The thought was terrifying. With sudden strength she sprang to her feet and gazed around. There was no one near.

"He has gone!" gasped the frightened woman; "gone and left me alone! What can I do? Oh, Neil, Neil, why did you leave me?"

With faltering footsteps, and many a backward glance, she left the spot where they had been last together. Once more she wandered down the valley.

Finally she resolved to call to him. Loudly she cried:

"Neil! Neil! Neil!"

But only the echoes answered:

"Neil!"

"We are separated," she sobbed. "I fear we shall never meet again. He is crazed, and may spring from the brink of some awful chasm!"

Thirty minutes later she sat down upon a small boulder to rest. For a long time she sat there looking up at the towering peaks. It was near mid-day, and the summer sun was pouring its warmth into the valley.

Finally she arose, and walked onward once more. Every now and then she would call her lover's name. Not that she expected an answer, but some uncontrollable impulse caused her to do so.

Suddenly she stopped and uttered a cry of terror. Up from behind a boulder not far away arose a fierce-looking man, who uttered a hoarse laugh of satisfaction.

"Thar ye be, pritty bird!" he cried, exultantly, as he stepped swiftly forward. "I reckon Rough Mose 'll gaffle onter thet leetle hundred dollars as ther cap'n offers fer yer safe return."

Swiftly she turned and flew away from him. Nerved by fear, she almost flew over the ground. With an angry oath, the man started in pursuit.

"Hole on!" he shouted, as he lumbered along. "Hole on there! W'ot in sin yer runnin' fer? I'll ketch ye, best you kin do."

He did overtake her, but not until she had given him quite a chase. He grasped her in his strong arms, uttering a panting laugh.

"Rud, didn't ye? Waal, you are some on ther fut an' no mistook."

"Who are you, sir?" gasped Lona.

"Me? Waal, I reckon I'm er tuff ole customer," was the reply. "I'm ginerally called Rough Mose by ther boys as know me. Sh'u'dn't wonder er ternal mite ef I war jist er leetle rough ter look at."

"But why do you detain me? What right have you to pursue and capture me?"

"Ther right o'might," was ther reply. "You can't deny that."

"You had better release me," declared Lona. "I have a friend who will call you to an account if you do me harm."

For an instant a startled look swept over Rough Mose's face. He peered sharply around, as he replied:

"Thet devil, Iron Fern. Waal, he is bad medicine, an' no mistook. He laid Johnson out in great shape, I'll allow. Ther' don't none o' us want ter run ag'in' him, but ther cap'n's offered a cool hundred fer your safe return to ther Vultures' Den an' I'm a-goin' ter take ye back or bu'st. If Iron Fern puts in his han' thar'll be su'thin' drap. You hear me!"

"The captain?" repeated Lona. "Whom do you mean? Where are you going to take me?"

"Back to ther place ther man o' ther fiery eyes helped ye out ov las' nite. Ther hull gang are s'archin' fer ye, but I'm ther lucky galoot as scoops ther hundred. He must be dead struck wi' ye to offer so much."

"What is your captain's name?"

"Down in Rocket Gulch they call him Flush Font, but—"

Lona interrupted him with a cry.

"Heaven protect me!" she wailed. "Save me from that terrible man!"

"Reckon ye don't love him none too well," grinned Rough Mose. "He's handsum, but he's wuss as ther Ole Nick when he breaks loose. He's er bad man ter hev fer er foe, but I don't reckon as he's got anythin' ag'in' you. I take it he's plumb offen his nut an' is dead gone onter yer good looks. By gum! you are a beauchy an' no mistook."

He gazed admiringly at her for several moments and suddenly a look came over his face that made Lona shrink back with fear.

"I'd good mine ter do it," he muttered. "W'ot do I keer fer er hundred! She's a beauchy; no gittin' round that. By gum! she's wu'th five hundred! I'll do it! Cum on, gal."

Lona hung back.

"No, no! Let me go!" she cried.

A fierce scowl darkened Rough Mose's bearded face and he glared at her savagely.

"Cum on, I say!" he snarled. "Ef you don't it'll be ther wuss fer you. I hain't ther kind o' a galoot as stan's foolin'."

She shuddered and dared not disobey. Rough Mose held fast to the trembling captive, and side by side they walked along. They did not go far before they entered a thick scrub growth and approached the deserted cabin in which Lona had had such a terrible adventure with Madam Mask. The woman shuddered as she recognized the place. The door was standing open and Mose dragged her toward it.

"Help! help!" she cried. "Let me go, you monster! Help!"

"Come along," he gritted. "I hain't goin' ter hurt ye. W'ot yer actin' this way fer?"

Through the doorway he dragged her and then she sunk helpless on the floor.

Mose advanced to where the dead boughs lay in the corner and with a single kick swept them aside. Then he stooped and lifted a trap-door which had been concealed beneath. A rude flight of steps leading downward into the darkness was revealed. Turning swiftly, he seized Lona and dragged her to the trap.

"Go down," he commanded.

"Oh, not no!" gasped the terrified woman. "Please don't make me go down there! Please don't!"

He raised his heavy, brutal fist.

"Go down!" he repeated.

And she was forced to obey.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MASK REMOVED.

FOR some time after Lona fell asleep, Iron Fern sat silently looking down at her. Several times he passed one hand over his forehead, and then shook his head in a strange way. Often he seemed to be listening and an eager, expectant look was upon his face. Each time the look gradually changed to one of disappointment. Finally, he bowed his face upon his hands and sat thus for several minutes.

At last he raised his head and muttered:

"He does not come. No longer can I hear the dip of his paddles. He has passed us by, and we must wait a while longer. It is tiresome waiting. I long to go over. And yet I should leave my blitter foe still living. Why didn't I kill him when he lay unconscious at my feet? I might have done it, but I let him live. I was a fool!"

He reached his pocket and drew forth his revolver. Deftly he removed the empty shell from the cylinder and slipped a good cartridge in its place. Then he twirled the cylinder to see if it was in good working order.

"I must find him," muttered the madman. "Something whispers in my ear telling me to kill him. Why should I spare him? He would not hesitate to take my life had he the chance. Yes, I must find him."

He stooped over the silent woman. Softly he called her name, but she did not stir.

"She is asleep," said Iron Fern. "She will sleep till I come back. I won't be gone long, my darling. He is not far away, and I can easily find the spot. The horse is dead, and he shall lie a corpse by the animal's side. Then I will return. I won't be long; oh, no, I won't be long."

Then, as if fearful of awakening her, he stole softly away. Back up the valley he made his way, that deadly revolver clasped in his right hand. His madness had taken another turn, and now he was controlled by a fierce desire to shed the blood of his foe.

After a time he reached the spot where the horse had fallen. The animal still lay with a bullet in its brain, but Flush Font was gone. He had either recovered and walked away, or had been removed by some one.

A terrible cry of baffled rage escaped Iron Fern's lips as he realized that his foe had escaped.

"Gone!" he cried; "gone! But he shall not escape me. I will find him. I was a fool to let him escape when he lay silent at my feet! But I will find him."

He hurried on hoping to find Flush Font. He seemed to have forgotten the woman whom he had left behind. His one mad desire seemed to be to find his foe and shed his blood.

It is useless to attempt to describe his aimless wanderings. The hours passed, and still he was searching for Delmont. Noon came. The blazing sun far up in the heavens poured its warmth upon the earth. Tortured by thirst, the Man of

Fire wandered on. Finally he discovered a tiny spring which bubbled from the rocks at the foot of a mountain, and soon slaked his thirst.

He lay in the shade beside the spring and soon fell asleep. Thoroughly exhausted, Iron Fern slept soundly as the sun sunk behind the Western peaks, and the afternoon wore away. The shadows of night were gathering when he awoke. He sat up and gazed around in amazement.

"Where am I?" he asked. "How came I here? Night is coming on and I am alone in this valley. What has happened?"

Vainly he asked himself these questions. For the time the memory of the events since his fall through the trap in the Vultures' Roost was lost to him. From that time everything seemed a blank. That something had happened since that fatal fall he felt sure; but vainly he asked himself what had occurred.

"My head pains me," he muttered, as he passed one hand over it; "and here is a large contusion, as though I had received a heavy blow. I remember falling through the trap, and after that everything seems confused. I do not know what occurred. I feel as if I had been dreaming."

He arose to his feet and gazed around.

"Night is at hand, and I know not where I am. In which direction does Rocket Gulch lay? That is a question which I am unable to answer. Unless I am fortunate I shall probably be obliged to sleep beneath the stars to-night. Never mind, I am good for it. I have spent more than one night with the blue sky for a canopy above me, and with the stars to keep me warm."

He started forward without any definite idea of the direction he would go. He thought that possibly he might strike the mountain stage trail and follow it into Rocket Gulch. Night came and found him still wandering on.

"Guess you'll sleep on the grass to-night, Iron Fern," he laughed. "You might fare worse. It is better to sleep on the grass than under it—at least most people think so. Hullo! what's that?"

He stopped in surprise. Some distance ahead he saw a light. It did not shine out brilliantly, but was subdued as if coming from within a tent. And within a tent it was, Iron Fern soon decided.

"Who in the world can be camped there?" he asked himself. "A prospector or miner who has made a find in this vicinity, perhaps. Any way, I am going to investigate."

He walked slowly and cautiously forward. His trusty revolver was in his hand, and he was on the alert for danger. As he drew nearer the outlines of the tent became more apparent. The tent was closed, and there were no signs of life anywhere about it. The Man of Fire paused within ten feet of the canvas house.

"A tent, sure enough," he thought; "and it looks familiar. I am going to see the interior, or my name is not Neil Fernald. I will be on my guard, and if any one catches me napping, they are welcome to do so. Here goes."

He advanced swiftly, and swept away the curtain which concealed the opening to the tent. A cry burst from his lips as he saw the interior. It was the tent of the masked fortuneteller of Rocket Gulch.

The woman was not in sight; but a moment after Iron Fern's cry of amazement was uttered, there was a commotion behind the curtains which divided the tent, and Madam Mask appeared. She uttered an exclamation of surprise and joy as she saw the Man of Fire.

"You have come!" she cried. "I hoped you would. Come in."

"How came you here?" asked Iron Fern, as he still remained in the opening. "I thought you were in Rocket Gulch."

"It matters not how I came," was her reply. "I am here. Rocket Gulch is not so very far away. There is nothing strange about the move. But how come you here?"

"That I cannot tell. It is a mystery to myself. You say Rocket Gulch is not far away. Will you kindly direct me so that I may find it? I shall esteem it as a great favor."

The woman hesitated. Finally, she said:

"I will on one condition."

"And that?"

"Is that you come in and listen to the complete story of your past and future life."

Iron Fern drew back with a haughty gesture. "I have no desire to witness more of your tricks," he declared. "I have seen enough of that fiendish mirror. If you wish to preserve it unbroken take care to keep it beyond my reach."

"It is not necessary to call the mirror into

use," asserted the woman. "I know your past and future, and can tell it to you without the aid of the wonderful glass. Will you listen?"

A laugh broke from Iron Fern's lips.

"I have more of a taste for a square meal than for listening to the wild fancies of a brain fertile with money-catching expedients. However, I suppose that the quickest way to get at a square meal is to listen to your talk."

He advanced into the tent, and quickly she brought a large easy-chair from beyond the damask curtains. This she placed for him and he dropped into it with a tired sigh.

"Now drive ahead," he said.

She brought another chair and sat down squarely before him, so near that their knees almost touched. Then she leaned forward and gazed keenly into his face for several moments.

"That's the same old phiz," he observed. "I don't believe you see anything new there."

"Hush!" she warned. "Give me your hands—both of them—and listen. First you shall hear of the past."

"Well, touch it lightly," implored the Man of Fire. "I am pretty well acquainted with the past and care to hear no more of it than I can help. Make your story as brief as possible."

"To begin: Your life has been filled with both joy and sorrow. The latter has turned to the bitterness of despair. Long ago you loved a beautiful and wealthy woman and your affections were fully reciprocated. That woman loves you just as dearly to-day, but you have learned to love another. The woman's name was Agnes Braddox, and she was a young heiress whose father had recently died. Among her friends were some people named Wilson—people who had once been wealthy and aristocratic, but had lost a fortune through business reverses. They had a daughter—a beautiful child called Lona.

"One summer—one fatal summer—Agnes Braddox accepted an invitation to spend a few weeks with the Wilsons. She went, and soon she and Lona became fast friends. She little dreamed of the sorrow that would come to her through the beautiful girl. Better for her and you would it have been had neither seen Lona Wilson!"

"For some time you had been paying attention to Agnes Braddox, although you had made no serious proposal to her. It was but natural that you should happen in the quiet country village where the Wilsons lived, and of course you met the beautiful Lona. The moment that you saw the heartless creature Agnes Braddox lost your love."

"Stop!" commanded Iron Fern. "I have heard enough. You are telling a story well-learned. There is nothing mysterious about that. In some way you have learned the story of my past life. Who are you?"

"Listen! listen! You must listen!" cried the woman. "I am about to explain the mystery of that midnight marriage."

"You soon conceived a passion for Lona Wilson. How the young creature bewitched you I am unable to say. She was still young and her parents were hopeful of marrying her to a wealthy man. Although not poor, you were far from wealthy. A month passed and you were still remaining at Lona's side, when suddenly you were called to attend to business matters in Colorado. You told Lona of this and asked her to be your wife. She consented, but when you asked the privilege to lay the matter before her parents, she would not hear to it. She was inclined to be wild and romantic as well as fickle. It was her fertile brain that planned a midnight marriage to take place at the little country church. She finally overruled your every objection, and the ceremony was performed at midnight before the day of departure. Within three months after you went to Colorado Lona Wilson married Mark Clayburn."

"Why repeat the story?" said Iron Fern, huskily. "Already it is written on my heart with an iron pen. You have told me nothing new."

"True I have not, but I will. Lona Wilson and Agnes Braddox were of equal height and weight. You married a closely-veiled woman at the country church that night. While the ceremony was taking place, Lona Wilson was locked in her room. It was Agnes Braddox who stood by your side and became your wife!"

"Woman!" cried Iron Fern, hoarsely; "don't lie to me!"

"It is true," she declared. "I swear it!"

"What proof have you?"

"Proof? I have the certificate which was left in Agnes Braddox's hands. Here it is, and

there you see her name instead of Lona Wilson's."

She held the paper up before him. He snatched it from her hands. One glance he gave, and a groan broke from his lips.

"'Tis true," he acknowledged—"true! And you—you are Agnes Braddox!"

"I am—Agnes, your wife!" she replied, as she snatched away the mask. "Oh, Neil, my husband! forgive me! forgive me! I loved you so dearly!"

He sat there like one dazed, staring at her with a wild, unnatural glare. He did not speak or move. She sprung up and clasped her arms about his neck.

"Neil! Neil!" she cried. "Don't look at me in that way! I am perishing for your love! Do not spurn me now!"

He uttered a hoarse shout and sprung to his feet sending her reeling from him.

"Love you!" he groaned. "I would sooner love a viper!"

And turning he sprung out of the tent and fled away through the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S DOOM.

Down the steps into the darkness went the trembling woman, closely followed by her villainous captor. Weak with fear and despair Lona came near falling once or twice and only saved herself with a great effort. At the foot of the stairs she paused in the darkness.

"Stan' right whar ye are," Rough Mose commanded. "I'll hev er light in a minute."

He struck a match and lighted a lamp which he found on a shelf near the foot of the stairs. By the dim light it became apparent that the cellar was divided by a rude partition. It was a dismal-looking hole, and the air was damp and unwholesome.

Rough Mose seized Lona by the arm and dragged her toward the partition. Terrified beyond expression, she could scarcely keep on her feet.

Mose opened a door set in the partition and thrust Lona through, following close behind.

"Hyer we are, pritty bird," chuckled the villain. "This here hain't exactly a palace, but then it'll do ter stop in fer a time. I don't propose ter keep ye hyer a great while, fer ye wud pine away an' die. Ye sha'n't stay hyer no longer 'n ther cap'n are comin' ter tarms, but he's got ter fork over five hundred or he'll never set eyes on ye. That's settled."

She looked around. It was far from a palace, indeed. Not a ray of light stole in from the outer world, and the air smelled close and musty. A rotte floor covered the ground, and on three sides were rough stone walls. A large table stood in the center of the room—if room it could be called—and there were several stools standing around. There was no other furniture in the place.

"Now you don't want ter be skeered, but jist keep cool till I cum back," said Mose. "I reckon ye must be summat hungry, an' I shell skin back hyer wi' sum grub jist erbout ez soon ez sarcumstances will permit. There is northin' hyer as kin hurt ye a bit, an' ye hev no cause ter be squarmish. Ef ye feel like hollerin', holler. 'Tain't likely any one will hear ye, an' so that'll do no hurt."

The woman's terror at being left in such a place overcame her fear of the rough man. She started toward him, holding out her hands imploringly and crying:

"Oh, sir! please don't leave me in this lonely place!—please don't! I shall die of fright! I never could stay here all alone!"

"Oh, yes, ye can," he grimed. "There hain't northin' to be skeered ov, an' I reckon you kin stay ef ye hev ter. I tell ye I won't be gone long, an' I will bring ye back suthin' ter eat. P'raps I'll take ye out o' hyer then, so keep up yer pluck. I'll leave ther light on this hyer table."

He put down the lamp and backed out through the doorway, closing and fastening the door. She was alone! Alone in that dreadful place beneath the deserted cabin! Seized by a sudden mad fear, she sprung forward and beat against the door with her fists, calling wildly:

"Come back! come back!"

There was no answer to her wild appeal. She tried to still the throbbing of her heart and listen. She heard Rough Mose mount the steps and close the trap-door. Then she heard him cross the cabin floor and close the door that they had found open. He was gone.

"Oh, Heavenly Father!" she moaned: "what will my fate be? Death may be a thousand times preferable. I hope never again to fall into the vile hands of Fontray Delmont."

Again she was seized by a feeling of frenzy

and beat against the door until her white hands bled. For a time she seemed like a madwoman. Suddenly the thought came to her that she was indeed going mad.

"Yes, I shall be mad!" she gasped. "If I remain here long, I shall be as bad as poor Neil. I wonder where he is. He is probably wandering through the valleys and ravines, not knowing or caring whither he goes. If he were sane, he would find and rescue me; but I have no hope of that now—no hope! no hope!"

She staggered to one of the stools and sat down. All the time she continued to mutter:

"Poor Neil! How I wronged him! I thought he was false to me, but he only fell into a snare set by that woman—that terrible woman. How desperate I became when, after Neil's departure, she showed me the certificate as proof of their marriage! I thought him false to me, and I did a terrible thing by marrying that man—that man whom my very soul abhorred. And then I killed him; but God knows I did not mean to! I gave him the powder as I had done many times before. I never dreamed that it was poison; yet I am a murderer!"

She bowed her face upon her arms, which rested on the table. For a long time she was silent. When she lifted her face it looked haggard by the dim light.

"A sleuth-hound is on my trail; I am hunted for murder. Mark Clayburn had wealthy friends, and they have offered a reward for my capture. If death does not come to my relief, I shall surely be dragged back there to expiate my crime. I would to Heaven that together Neil and I had sprung from that cliff last night. Our lives and our sufferings would have ended on the rocks below."

She sprung up and paced the floor. The rotten boards creaked and creaked beneath her feet. She wrung her hands and pressed them to her hot temples.

"Yes! yes!" she murmured; "I shall go mad! I know I shall! It seems as though I could batter down that wall, yet I know I cannot. I would cry for help, but no one would hear me. By and by that terrible man will return. Oh, if Neil would only find me!"

After a time she did cry for help. Again and again she shouted. She did not expect an answer, yet something caused her to call. The minutes became hours, and still she paced the floor, only pausing now and then and resting a few moments.

It was more than two hours after Rough Mose's departure, when she fancied she heard a cautious step on the cabin floor overhead. She pressed her hands to her throbbing bosom to still the beating of her heart. She held her breath and listened.

"It must have been imagination," she whispered. "No! no! There it is again!"

Yes, this time she was sure that she heard a light footfall above. Some one was crossing the floor. They paused in the corner near the trap-door, and then she heard the dead boughs removed.

Some one was coming!

Despite the fact that she had been calling for help, the thought terrified her. Helpless with fear, she sunk down on one of the stools and waited. Only by a powerful effort did she prevent herself from shrieking madly.

She heard the trap-door lifted, and then the person, whoever it was, uttered a smothered exclamation. She felt sure that it was not her recent captor; but who was it?

Faltering steps descended the stairs, and then she knew that the person was just beyond the rough partition. Still she choked down her desire to shriek, and sat staring straight at the door, waiting for it to open. Soon she heard the unknown fumbling with the fastenings.

"Hang that match!" muttered an unrecognizable voice. Then there was a few moments' pause, after which the fumbling was resumed.

Soon the door swung open. With a cry of satisfaction and triumph, Selim Scott, the detective, stepped into the apartment.

"I have found you again!" he cried. "Fortune directed my steps to the spot where I heard your cries for help."

Lona did not speak. Her lips were dumb with despair, and her heart felt like a stone in her bosom.

"How came you here?" asked Scott.

She did not reply.

"Oh, well, it makes little difference so long as I have found you," he declared. "Come, we had better be getting out of this hole. I wouldn't fancy being caught in here by a foe."

He grasped her arm with one hand and lifted the lamp with the other. Then he led her from the place. She made no attempt to resist, but

yielded herself to her fate. They ascended the stairs and stood in the cabin above.

"I have no further use for this," remarked Scott, as he extinguished the light and set it down upon the floor. "I can't stop to close this trap in the floor. The individual who left you there will be somewhat surprised when he finds the cage open and the bird missing. The air will probably be filled with sulphury oaths."

They crossed the cabin floor and passed out of the door. Barely had they reached the open air when a pistol-shot sounded close at hand, and without a cry or a groan the detective fell to the ground.

Rough Mose sprung into view, revolver in hand. With a gasp of terror Lona sunk beside the stricken man. In an instant Mose was bending over the detective and examined his wound.

"Jist in time, by gum!" cried the villain. "I war bringin' yer fodder, leetle one; but I reckon ef I'd been a leetle slower I'd hed my trubble fer northin'. I reckon I got erlong soon ernuff ter cook this coon's smelt."

He bent over the detective and examined his wound.

"He'll never poke his nose inter my bissess ag'in," declared Mose.

At this moment swift footsteps reached the ruffian's ears. He whirled sharply, his revolver half-upraised, and an angry oath of dismay escaped him.

Flush Font stood not ten feet away, looking at him over the barrel of a revolver.

"Helloa!" exclaimed Delmont, in evident surprise, as he saw the face of his satellite. "Is that you, Mose?"

"I reckon it is," was the gruff reply.

"Well, what does this mean?" asked the chief of the Vultures, as he lowered his revolver.

"It means that I found this galoot draggin' ther lady inter this ole but, an' salted him on ther spot, or words to that effeck."

"You did well, and have earned the hundred which I offered for her return to me. But who is this chap?"

Flush Font gazed into the detective's face, and then uttered a cry of amazement.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "It is the detective whom I dropped over the precipice at the Roost last night. How in the world did he escape being dashed to pieces on the rocks below?"

"Don't ask me," grunted Mose. "I'll never tell."

"Well, his career is finished this time, sure. We shall not be troubled by him again. And now we will carry this fair lady to the Vultures' Den."

Rough Mose shot an angry look toward his chief, but he did not dare remonstrate.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TERRIBLE FATE.

HELPLESS to resist, Lona was carried back to the Vultures' Den. Her captor conveyed her to the chamber from which the Man of Fire had rescued her. Ere Rough Mose left her, he whispered in her ear:

"Ther cap'n sha'n't hev you fer er hundred, pritty one. Five hundred is less'n you're wu'th. I'll git you away frum him, or my name ain't Rough Mose."

She did not realize the import of his words. She was powerless with a sort of dumb despair, and a torpor enveloped her mental faculties. For the time she had lost all interest in her fate. She felt that death was preferable to life, yet could she have killed herself by lifting her hand it is doubtful if she would have made the effort.

Within the cavern chamber, Fontray Delmont placed her in the large easy-chair beside the table. The lighted lamp was still swinging in the center of the chamber. The man stopped and, with folded arms, stood looking at the woman. Finally he said:

"Lona, you are to be my wife. I have sworn it, and Iron Fern, aided by a legion of demons, cannot prevent the marriage. I have secured wealth. It matters not how I got it, but when you are mine, your every desire shall be gratified. I am sincere in my desire to marry you, for I love you with more than a passing fancy. Your beauty, the divine light in your eyes, has kindled a flame in my heart which nothing can subdue. Only your own sweet self can keep it within bounds."

He paused, but she did not speak—she did not even look at him. Her face was very pale, so pale that it looked almost ghastly. Her suffering was telling severely on her. He saw this, and said:

"Lona, I am sorry that you are suffering so much. I hope you will believe me when I tell

you that I am willing to do everything in my power to lessen your troubles. I love you far too dearly for my own present happiness, but I look longingly to the future when I hope that true happiness will come to me through your love. It is impossible for you to understand how much I love you. No woman on earth has ever aroused in my bosom the emotions which your fair self has made real. Once before I saw you I thought I loved a woman, but I now know that I misinterpreted my own heart. You and you alone have I ever truly loved."

Again he paused, yet she did not look at him. He seemed disappointed.

"I shall have to leave you for a time," he continued. "Food shall be brought you at once. I hope that, for your own sake, you will eat. You must require sustenance. Try to preserve your strength."

A moment later and he was gone.

Delmont descended the stone steps and soon swept away the curtain which covered the entrance to the Vultures' sleeping apartment. Rough Mose was there, silently smoking in a corner, and one of the other men was asleep in a bunk. Flush Font strode forward and aroused this man.

"Wake up here, Carl," he commanded. "Where are Stubble and Johnson?"

The fellow sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"They have not yet returned from the search," he answered. "Stubble is probably determined to make a desperate attempt to secure that hundred offered for the recapture of the girl, and Johnson swears that he will know no rest until he gets even with the Man of Fire."

"Good for Johnson! All that I ask is that he brings that devil to me. I will finish Iron Fern if he ever falls into my power again. I could crush the life from his body without a qualm of remorse."

And Flush Font looked as if he spoke the truth. He continued:

"There is a lady in the unfortunates' parlor, Carl, and I wish you would prepare and carry her some food as quickly as possible. Have a care that it is something temp'ing, and be very particular not to cause the lady any unnecessary alarm. Do you understand?"

"I do, captain."

"All right, then, be about it."

And, without glancing at Rough Mose, Delmont left the chamber. Carl hurried away to obey his orders.

"Go!" hissed Mose. "You didn't stop ter look at me—oh no! You never mentioned that leetle hundred—oh, no! But that's all right. Ole Mose hain't no fool, an' you'll pay five hundred fer her. Ther fu'st chance I git, I'll take her out o' hyer. Five hundred—she's w'u'th er thousan'!"

The captive was increasing in value in Rough Mose's estimation.

Delmont retired to the cabin on the crag, and he was not seen in the cavern again for hours.

Darkness had long shrouded mountain and ravine when the two absent robbers returned to the Den. They came back flushed with triumph, bearing a bound and helpless man. Iron Fern had once more fallen into the hands of his enemies.

Quickly Delmont was summoned. He found the Man of Fire lying at the foot of the stone steps. Several flaring torches lighted the scene, and revealed the white face and burning eyes of the captive.

"Ye gods!" shouted the triumphant robber leader. "This is a sight for sore eyes. Such good fortune I did not expect. How in the world did you do it, boys?"

Johnson answered:

"We were s'archin' fer ther gal—that is, Stubbles war lookin' fer her, but I'll allow that I cared more ter git my peepers onto this daisy. We hunted everywhar, an' darkness found us sum' way frum hyer. Jist arter dark we diskivered a lighted tent, an' war creepin' toward it, ter see w'ot fool war campin' thar, w'en out jumps this galoot an' runs plumb inter our arms. It war sort o' a s'prise, I'll allow; but I reckon he war taken back jist er leetle ther wu'st. Stubble grabbed him. I had my small gun in my han', an' let him hev it quick ez lightnin' with ther butt. Thet jist knocked him plumb down, an' ther way we picked onter him an' trussed 'im up war er caution ter greased wind. We had 'im foul afore he c'u'd rekiver frum ther thump onto ther cokernut. Then we fotched him in."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Delmont. "You have done well, and shall be duly rewarded. Luck has again turned in my favor. Once more the world moves in the right direction."

Then he approached Iron Fern and crouched

by his side. The light of the flaring torches revealed a fiendish look upon the triumphant villain's face. He glared straight into the captive's fiery eyes for the space of a minute ere he spoke. Then he hissed:

"Now, you devil, you lie powerless before me. Your bonds are strong, and you cannot break them. I am your deadly foe. If I saw fit to do so, I could sheathe a knife in your bosom in an instant. One quick, sharp blow, and your life would be ended."

He paused and glared down at the Man of Fire. Iron Fern's eyes returned the gaze unwaveringly. The helpless man neither flinched nor trembled. Indeed, in the depths of his glowing orbs shone a contemptuous light.

"You do not flinch," continued Delmont. "You even dare to look disdainful; but I tell you now that ere you are an hour older I will make you plead like the most abject coward on earth. Since the moment when you forced me over the card-table to swallow some words I had uttered, I have hated you; but since I learned that you are devoted to the woman whom I love, my hatred has known no bounds. In some way you escaped uninjured from the fall through the trap into the Death Pit, and then you succeeded in getting out of this cavern and taking Lona with you. But once more you are in my power, and Lona is also a prisoner."

"Ha! That made you start! Well, listen; I have more to say. Lona is soon to become my wife. I love her dearly, truly. I shall do everything in my power to make her happy. We will leave this country and find a home far over the sea. I will surround her with every luxury that human heart can ask for. Our home shall become a Paradise of happiness and love. She shall learn to listen longingly for my coming and run eagerly to meet me. She will forget that you ever existed, and all our lives will be overflowing with peace and joy. How like you the picture?"

"Bah!" cried Iron Fern. "You are a fool to think such a thing possible! Do you fancy that she—pure and spotless as a white dove—could learn to love such a vile serpent as you? Man, I gave you credit for more brains, villain though you are."

"I do not think anything about it," Delmont declared; I know that I can teach her to love me. I have only to cause her to forget the past to accomplish my object. Far away from the old scenes and faces, with nothing to conjure up painful memories, this will be a comparatively easy task. Meanwhile, you will be moldering in your grave, for to-night you die!"

The Man of Fire laughed. There was little mirth in the sound; it had a cold metallic ring, but it showed that the man's nerves were still wonderfully steady.

"You are making considerable talk," said Iron Fern, quietly. "There is an old saying about there being numerous slips between the cup and the lip which may apply to this case."

"You think so? Well, keep on thinking. In a short time you will sing a different tune. I do not mean to kill you at a single stroke, but I shall devise some method of torture that will give me the satisfaction of seeing you writhe in agony and groan aloud in anguish of soul. The passions within me are of the most intense nature. When I love, I love with my whole soul; when I hate, the bitterness of a fiend is in my heart."

Iron Fern felt that the man spoke the truth, yet not by word or look did he betray a trace of fear. What the strain was on his nerves no living man but himself could tell. He had been well named Iron Fern.

Delmont arose to his feet and turned to three of his satellites who were witnessing the scene. Rough Mose was not present.

"Men," cried Flush Font, "do any of you raise an objection to this man's punishment? I have decreed that he shall die."

No one spoke.

"Good! It is well that you do not care to dispute the decree. Now, how shall he die?"

"We are willing to leave that to you," said Johnson. "All that we ask is that he is put out of the way."

"Good again! The executor shall be chosen by lot. But ere he breathes his last, I have determined he shall beg to be killed. To force him to do this, I shall call fire to my aid. He shall be blinded by a red-hot iron!"

A gasp of amazement escaped the lips of the listening Vultures.

"You have heard the decree," cried Delmont, waving his hand. "Johnson, bring the little blacksmith's forge and build the fire. Make haste to prepare the gleaming iron that shall

forever burn out the red light in those glowing eyes. My soul hungers to hear his cries and entreaties. Make haste! Make haste!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRENGTH OF DESPAIR.

STERN, pitiless as death, Fontray Delmont stood with folded arms while his chosen tools hastened to execute his orders. His dark face was marked by a fiendish, malignant look that was plainly the reflection of his inhuman soul. It seemed that a legion of demons were dancing with joy within his throbbing bosom.

With all possible haste, Johnson brought the forge and built the fire. Stubble brought forward an iron rod and thrust it into the dancing flames. It seemed that there was no way for the Man of Fire to escape the awful doom.

Delmont watched the proceedings with ill-concealed impatience, his eyes moving from the glowing forge to the hard-set, immovable face of the captive. Iron Fern watched the preparations with a sort of fascination. It seemed that he did not realize his great peril, but Flush Font felt sure that the man's wonderful nerve was sustaining him.

"I will bring him to it!" gritted the fiend beneath his breath. "I will make him beg, or my name is not Fontray Delmont! The sound of his pitiful cries will be music in my ears, and will bring joy to my burning heart. When my hatred is sated, then I will give myself up to a life of happiness and love."

And Iron Fern's heart was crying:

"God in Heaven! must I die and leave Lona—my darling Lona!—in this inhuman monster's power? I fear the thought will break me down. Were it not for her, I could better meet my fate. Her doom will be a hundred times worse than mine; and yet I am powerless to save her."

"Ha!" cried Flush Font, who had been eagerly scanning Iron Fern's face. "You are beginning to weaken already. Good! I will have you begging within five minutes. Slowly the iron is turning red—the iron that will sear your eyeballs, and for you blot out the light of day forever! With my own hands I will press the gleaming iron upon your eyes. Ah! what a revenge for a soul that hates as mine!"

Delmont's rough companions shuddered as they heard their leader's words. They looked at him with awe, and wondered as they heard Iron Fern's calm reply:

"All signs of weakness are pictured by your imagination. You have seen none. As for begging, were you able to inflict upon me the tortures of the damned, you could not make me do that."

"We shall see," was the low, fierce answer.

Within a minute's time the iron was gleaming red. Still Johnson worked the bellows until it changed to a lurid white. Then Flush Font stepped forward and seized the unheated end. Swinging the glowing instrument of torture above his head, the villain turned swiftly toward the Man of Fire.

"Ah!" cried Delmont, with a fiendish laugh. "Now you shall know the depth of my hatred! Now you shall be made to cry out in agony! Now you shall taste of the tortures of the condemned!"

He advanced swiftly and knelt beside the helpless captive. He held the glowing iron within ten inches of Iron Fern's face. The heat almost scorched the prisoner, yet he did not cry out or shrink away. His hands were tightly clinched, and his teeth pressed together like the jaws of a vise. Within his soul was an unfathomable agony.

"Look around, Iron Fern," continued Delmont—"look around. Use your eyes for the last time on earth! First comes blindness—then death!"

There was no relenting look on the villain's face—he had no thought of showing mercy. Mercy! The word was unknown to him. Iron Fern knew that there was no hope that entreaty or prayer would stay the cruel hand.

"The last moment has come!" declared Flush Font. "Still you do not beg. Now, your eyes shall feel the iron!"

At that instant there came the sound of swiftly running feet, a sharp shriek and a baffled oath of rage. Down the stone steps came a flying female figure, and in a moment Iron Fern rolled swiftly over and over, for the time getting beyond the reach of that terrible iron.

Rough Mose had been getting in his work. While the others were busy with the captive Man of Fire, Mose had bent his energies in an attempt to leave the place with Lona. The rough had fallen in love with the beautiful

woman himself, and had resolved that Delmont should not have her unless he paid a good round price.

It is uncertain who Lona feared the most, Rough Mose or Fontray Delmont. It was but natural, however, that she should improve any opportunity to escape from the Vultures' Den, even though Rough Mose were the person who aided her to do so. But when the ruffian attempted to clasp her in his arms, she quickly broke away and ran. Fortune directed her to the spot where she witnessed Iron Fern's peril. With Rough Mose in close pursuit, she fled down the stone steps. Stubble seized her in his arms.

"Hold fast to her!" cried Delmont, as he dropped the glowing iron and leaped to his feet. "What does this mean?"

The question was addressed to Rough Mose, who came panting down the steps. For an instant the ruffian was unable to reply.

"Mean?" he finally gasped. "It means that that woman has escaped from the place where she was confined an' I'm arter her."

"You lie!" shouted Flush Font. "You released her, you traitor!"

For a moment Rough Mose shrunk back; then a sudden defiant look transformed his face, and he replied:

"Hev it ter suit yerself. I reckon ye'r' about right. I did release her, an' w'ot's more, she hain't goin' back thar unless you fork over a clean thousan' in spondulics."

An instant Flush Font seemed struck dumb with amazement. That one of his followers would dare face him like this he had never dreamed. Finally, a sarcastic laugh broke from his lips.

"You poor fool!" he sneered. "Have you lost your head? You should know better than to make such a demand of me. Your folly shall cost you dear."

"Not much it won't," was the dogged reply. "I'm not afraid o' you, ye'll find out. You've had things pretty much yer own way ever since I knew anythin' o' yer, an' now I'm goin' ter putt in a say-so. You hear me, an', by gum, I'm talkin' bisness!"

Delmont advanced toward the villain, threateningly, but Rough Mose did not cower. Instead, he drew a long knife and faced Flush Font, snarling savagely:

"Cum on, durn ye! Cum on, ef ye wants er leetle picnic! I'm hyer ter stay, an' you'll find it out arter a time. Thet gal's mine as much as she's yours, an' I'll fight fer her!"

Delmont paused long enough to extend his hand toward Johnson and say:

"Give me your knife."

Not for an instant did he take his eyes off Rough Mose, and, with Johnson's knife in his hand, he advanced once more. He was an adept with the weapon, and felt himself fully the master of his rebellious follower.

Mose stood his ground, and the two men met. The flaring torchlight showed a gleam of circling steel, then there was a clash as the two knives met. Then the spectators witnessed a terrific combat. Round and round the men circled, their eyes blazing, and their breath coming quick and short.

It is impossible to describe the battle, but Flush Font was the better man, as Rough Mose soon discovered.

"Hold on, cap'n!" gasped the traitor. "I guess ye'r' too much fer me. I cave!"

"Stand up like a man," gritted Delmont. "I shall show you no quarter. This is a fight to the finish!"

Rough Mose did not speak again. He fought like a tiger, but his efforts were unavailing. Flush Font parried every stroke, and gradually, step by step, he forced the ruffian backward.

Suddenly Mose uttered a groan, dropped his knife, and staggered away into the darkness of a passage. Delmont flung down the knife that had served his purpose, and turned to the silent spectators.

"It is finished," he declared. "He has met a merciful fate for a traitor!"

No one ventured to speak.

"Heat the iron again!" commanded Delmont.

"The tragedy is not yet ended."

Then he advanced and took hold of Lona's arm.

"Come!" he commanded, peremptorily.

She sought to break from him, but he held her fast.

"Let me go!" cried the desperate woman.

"You are a monster! Let me go!"

"It is useless to struggle," declared Delmont. "You must return to the chamber from which that man released you."

"I will not!" she screamed. "Release your hold!"

"Do be reasonable," implored the man. "You cannot stay here, for things will happen which you should not see—shall not see!"

She did not reply, but struggled with all the strength of a terrible terror. He seized her in his arms, and attempted to bear her away. One wild cry broke from her lips:

"Oh, Neil! Neil, my darling!"

That cry seemed to pierce the very depths of Iron Fern's soul. Nerved by despair, he seemed suddenly to have the strength of a giant. One mighty effort he made, and the cords which bound him snapped asunder.

In an instant the Man of Fire was on his feet. Ere any one knew that he was free, he had snatched Lona from Fontray Delmont's arms, and sent that individual to the ground with a terrific blow.

For one brief instant Iron Fern clasped the woman he loved to his breast. He found time to whisper in her ear:

"Have courage! I will save you, or we will die together!"

A cry of joy came from her very heart. He heard it, and for one instant felt a thrill of supreme happiness.

As Flush Font struck the ground his hand closed on the haft of the knife he had dropped a few moments before. He leaped up with the deadly weapon in his grasp, and a cry of fiendish fury echoed through the cavern.

Straight toward the weaponless Man of Fire leaped Fontray Delmont, the red knife held aloft. He had resolved to slay his foe at once.

"You devil!" shouted Delmont. "I will have your blood!"

"Come on!" cried Iron Fern, as he thrust Lona behind him. "I will meet you barehanded, you coward!"

Flush Font struck straight at his foe's breast, but, quick as a flash, Iron Fern knocked aside the blow. Delmont was whirled half-way round, and before he could turn, he received a blow behind the ear that hurled him forward upon his face.

He uttered a groan and lay still, for his own knife had been buried in his breast!

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER SHADOW, SUNSHINE.

THESE exciting events had transpired with astonishing rapidity. Flush Font's three companions had witnessed the thrilling tragedy without being able or willing to interfere. They had been amazed to see the Man of Fire burst his bonds and spring to his feet, and now they were not less astonished at the unlooked-for termination of an armed man's duel with a barehanded foe. They had expected to see their captain strike down the unarmed Iron Fern, but, instead, had witnessed a most unexpected event.

"Good Lord!" gasped Stubble, as he gazed with distended eyes at the terrible tableau.

Johnson uttered an oath and reached for a revolver. In an instant he had the Man of Fire covered, when, swift as thought, a woman sprung out of a dark passage and threw herself in front of Iron Fern, just as Johnson's revolver spoke. With a cry, the new-comer sunk to the ground.

"Great Moses!" exclaimed the startled robber, "I hev dropped a woman!"

The unfortunate female was the mysterious fortune-teller of Rocket Gulch! She had heard the noise of the scuffle when Iron Fern was captured by the two Vultures, and had seen him borne away by them. She had followed them through the night to the mountain cave, and had arrived just in time to witness Iron Fern's peril, and to save his life by stopping Johnson's bullet with her own body. When she fell, she dropped a revolver which she had held as she flung herself in front of the imperiled man. Iron Fern stooped swiftly and grasped this weapon.

"Throw up your hands!" cried the man, with the gleaming eyes, as he leveled the weapon at the dismayed robbers. "Up with them, or I will bore you!"

The deadly glow in his eyes cowed the startled villains. Stubble and Carl quickly obeyed; Johnson alone hesitated.

"Up with them!" thundered the desperate man. "Drop that revolver and put up your hands or die!"

No longer did Johnson hesitate, for he well knew that it would mean death to do so. Reluctantly he put up his hands.

"Now you fellow," said Iron Fern pointing one finger straight at Carl, whom he had at once selected as being the most cowardly of the three, "advance one step. Right! Now

be careful how you move, for I am chain lightning on the shoot and I never miss my game. Remove the weapons from Stubble's belt and drop them on the floor. Good enough! You are sure that you have not overlooked anything? Very well. Up with your hands again."

Controlled by fear, the ruffian obeyed implicitly. Iron Fern continued:

"Now, Stubble, seeing that your claws are clipped, you will accommodate me by removing your companion's weapons and treating them as he has yours. You will observe that I am looking at you over this revolver all the time."

Of course the man obeyed. There was something in the aspect of the Man of Fire that caused Stubble to shudder lest he should misconstrue some of his movements. He felt that the least false move sealed his doom.

"Now, Johnson, right about face! Don't lower those huge paws an inch. Walk directly backward till I tell you to stop. There; that's far enough. Now, Stubble, you remove Johnson's weapons. Have a care while you are about it!"

And thus Johnson was disarmed.

"Now, gentlemen," went on the Man of Fire, "you will form in line facing me. Right again! You fellows appear to be well drilled. Advance!"

Straight toward him they came. When they were a dozen feet away, he cried:

"Halt! Now down on your faces, every man. Lay flat! Be lively about it! That's proper. Extend your hands above your heads—so. Now lay perfectly quiet. Remember this revolver and that the one who tries anything funny will get hurt so bad that he will never be able to tell what struck him."

During this time Lona, who had sunk helpless to the ground upon being thrust behind Iron Fern, had watched the proceedings in a dazed manner. Now the Man of Fire turned to her and said:

"Lona, come here!"

She arose with an effort and advanced to his side.

"Here," he continued, "take this revolver and stand right here. If one of the men stirs put the weapon against his back and pull on the trigger. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes! But, where are you going?—you are not going to leave me?"

"Only for a moment. I will return quickly, dear. Be brave, and do as I have directed."

He was gone. In less than two minutes he returned with a stout rope which he had procured in the Vultures' sleeping apartment. He was surprised to see Madam Mask sitting up and gazing vacantly around. He paid no attention to her, however, but proceeded to bind the defenseless robbers. This task was soon completed.

"There," cried the Man of Fire, "those fellows are harmless. Now I will take a look at Flush Font."

He advanced to Delmont's side and turned him over. As he did so, a groan broke from the wounded man's lips, his dark eyes unclosed and he gazed straight into Iron Fern's brown orbs.

"Lost!" gasped the poor wretch—"all lost! The game has turned against me on the last deal! Lost—happiness, love, life—all lost!"

"You are wounded unto death," said Iron Fern, quietly. "You are dying now."

"I know it," he whispered. "Dying—I know it! I am going before the Great Bar of Justice! My God! what a crime-stained wretch I am!"

"Is there anything that you wish to say? You have not long to live."

"Yes! yes! I must confess— Ah! heavens, who is that?"

He started up with one hand stretched toward Madam Mask, who was sitting up, a few feet away. The woman's hands were pressed to her side, and she looked very pale and ghastly.

"Who is that?" repeated the dying man. "Not Agnes? Surely that is not Agnes?"

"Yes," replied Iron Fern, with suppressed eagerness, "that is Agnes—Agnes Braddox, who has been known in Rocket Gulch as Madam Mask."

"Merciful Father!" gasped Fontray Delmont. "I did not know her, for I never saw the face beneath the mask. She is my wife!"

"What?" shouted the Man of Fire—"what do you say? Your wife?"

"Yes; I married her eight years ago, before her father died. The old man opposed the union, but we were secretly married. We resolved not to make this known till after her father was no more, for we feared that he would disown her if he discovered. After a year I wandered away and have never seen her face since until a moment ago."

"I thought you dead," said the woman. "I heard so, years ago. Oh, Ray, I truly thought you dead!"

"I shall be dead in a short time," he groaned, as he sunk back to the ground. "If this knife were removed, I should bleed to death in one minute. But I must confess before I die—I must confess!"

"What is it that you wish to confess?"

"It's about the death of Mark Clayburn, my half-brother. I killed him!"

Such a shriek as burst from Lona's lips as she flung herself on her knees by his side!

"What do you say?" she cried. "Killed Mark Clayburn—you? Heavenly Father! Is this true? How can it be? Speak! speak!"

"I loved you so!" panted Delmont. "I was ready to forfeit my soul for you. How I hated my brother for possessing you no tongue can tell. I resolved to kill him. As you know, his physician forbade him using liquor at all, but I sometimes induced him to take a little when he was having one of his ill turns. On the day that he died I did this, and the wine that I gave him was poisoned. Not two minutes after I left the room, you entered and gave a simple powder such as the doctor had prescribed. When it was discovered that Mark Clayburn had been poisoned of course suspicion pointed to you. Before this you had spurned my love, but then I thought I saw a chance to force you to become mine. I aided you to fly, with the intention of joining you and making you my wife. It is unnecessary to tell the story of subsequent events."

"And I am not truly a murderer?" cried Lona.

"No, you are not. I swear it with my dying breath!"

Then the wronged woman uttered a faint cry and sunk in a swoon.

Iron Fern lifted her in his strong arms and bore her to the Vultures' sleeping-chamber. There he placed her on one of the cots, and set about restoring her. This he soon accomplished. No human pen can picture the scene that took place then.

Iron Fern finally returned to the spot where he had left his captives and the man and woman of sinful lives. He was not gone long before he returned.

"Come, Lona, darling," he said, "we will leave this awful place."

"What of them?" she asked.

"The man's spirit has returned to the One who gave it," he replied. "The woman lies beside the body and refuses to move."

Iron Fern took a lighted lamp, and together they made their way out of the cavern. They passed the spot that was still lighted by the flaring torches, and Lona shuddered and turned away her eyes as they went by the two silent figures that lay on the cavern floor. Soon they stood on the mountain crag, beneath the million stars that twinkled in the blue vault above.

In the morning a band of men from Rocket Gulch visited the mountain cave. They found that the three Vultures had slipped their bonds in some way and escaped. Rough Mose, however, was discovered in the passage where he had fallen.

Side by side the sinful man and woman, Fontray Delmont and his wife, were found. Both had passed over the Dark River to the unknown shore, and their passionate hearts would know no more of love and hatred. They were buried within the cavern in one grave.

Of the escaped Vultures, Stubble was never afterward heard of. Johnson met a violent death in Arizona, about a year later. Carl, fortunately, fell into Neil Fernald's hands and was taken East to aid in proving Lona's innocence of crime, he having heard Delmont's confession. On being released, he at once disappeared.

"Iron Fern, the Man of Fire," no more exists. He is now known as plain Neil Fernald, and the beautiful Lona is his wife. All the bitterness and sorrow of the past is forgotten and blotted out by the great happiness of the present. No longer do his eyes glow with the red light of fiery passions; looking into their brown depths Lona can see only a light of tenderness and true love.

THE END.

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